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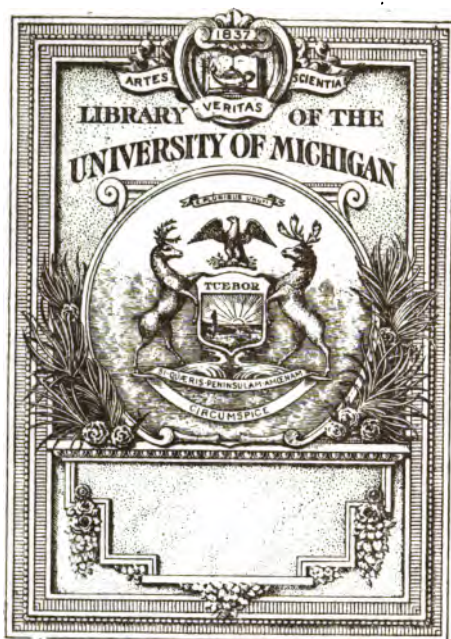
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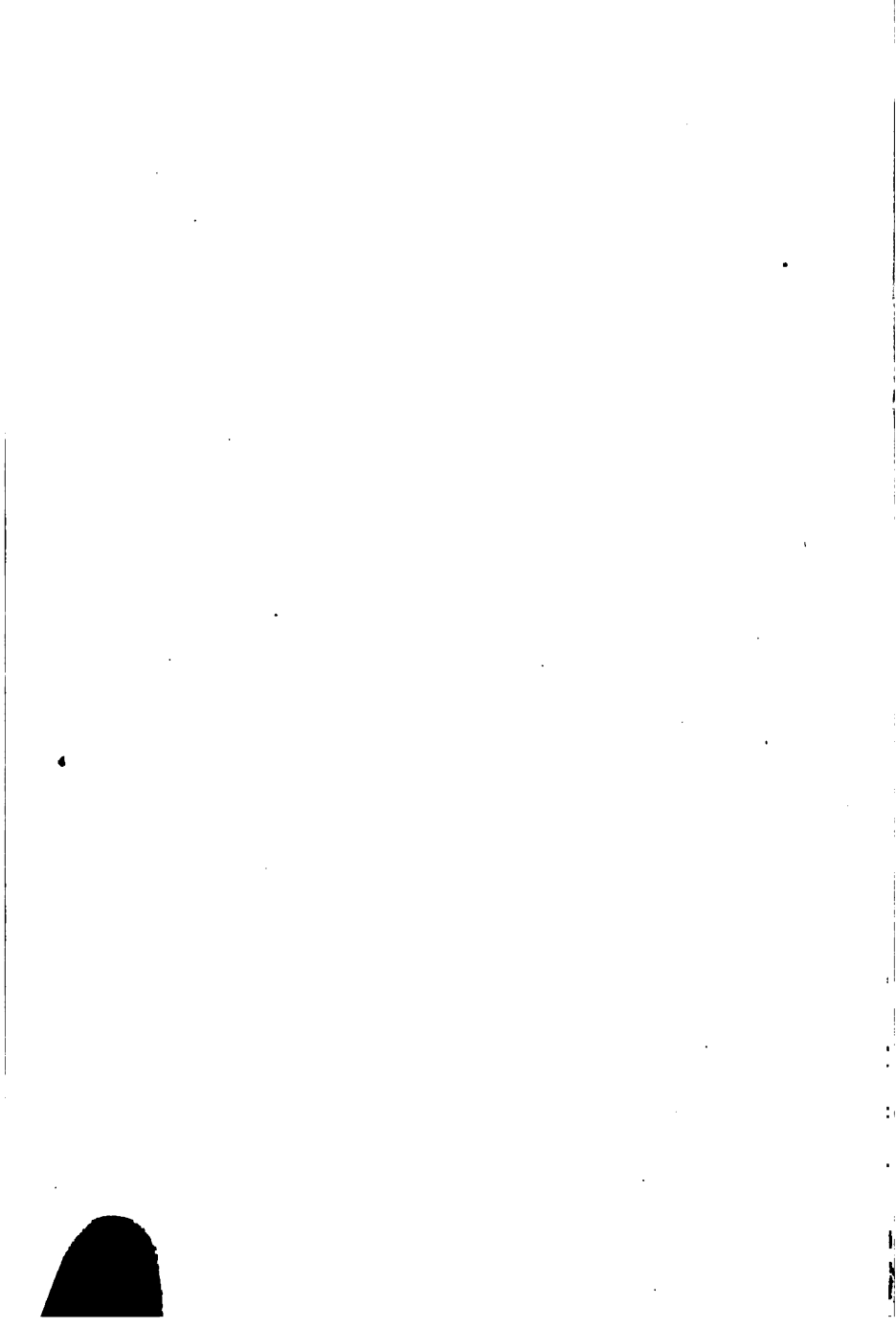


Will N. Harben



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# Pole Baker

A Novel

By

Will N. Harben

Author of

"Abner Daniel" "The Georgians"

"The Substitute" etc.



New York and London  
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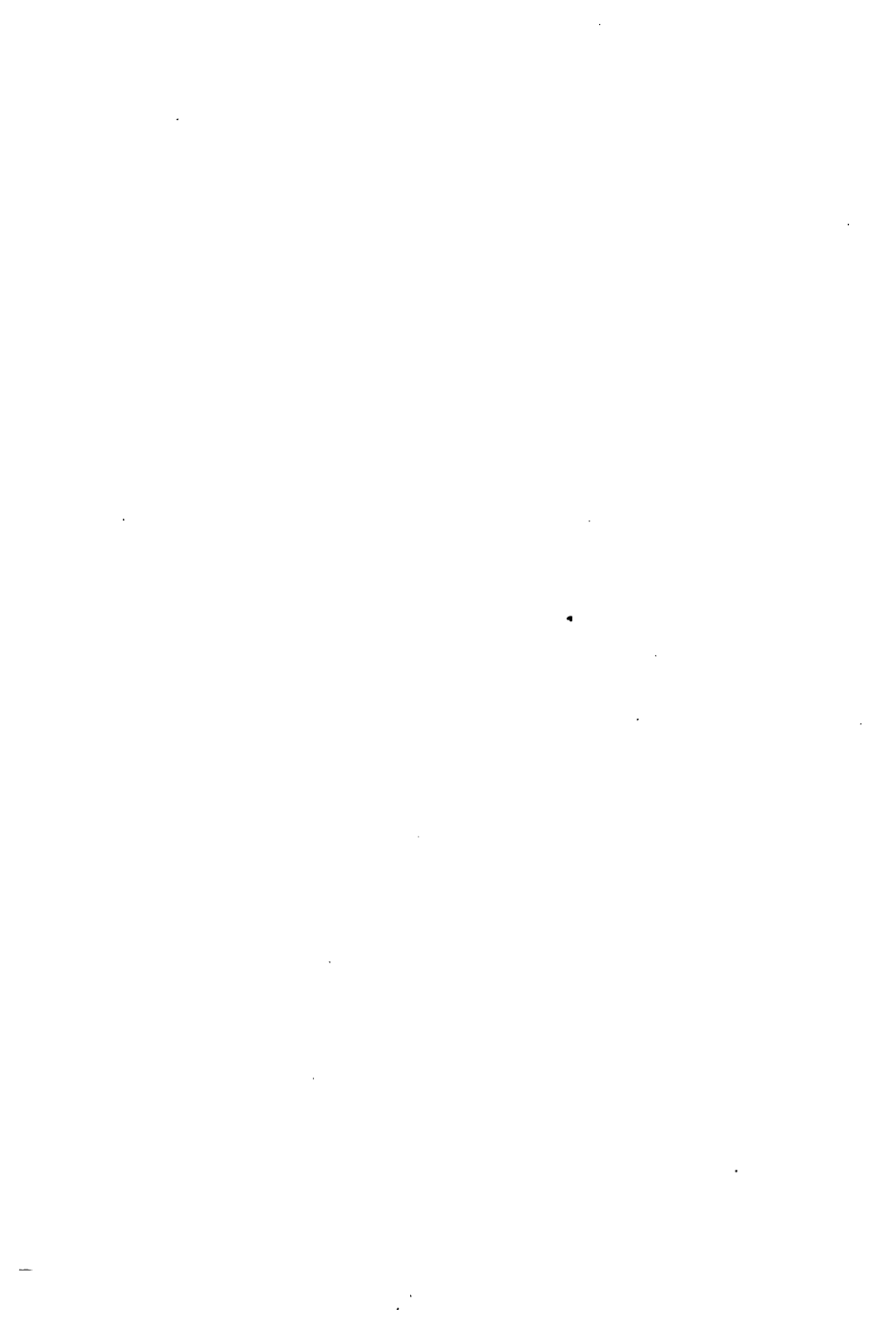
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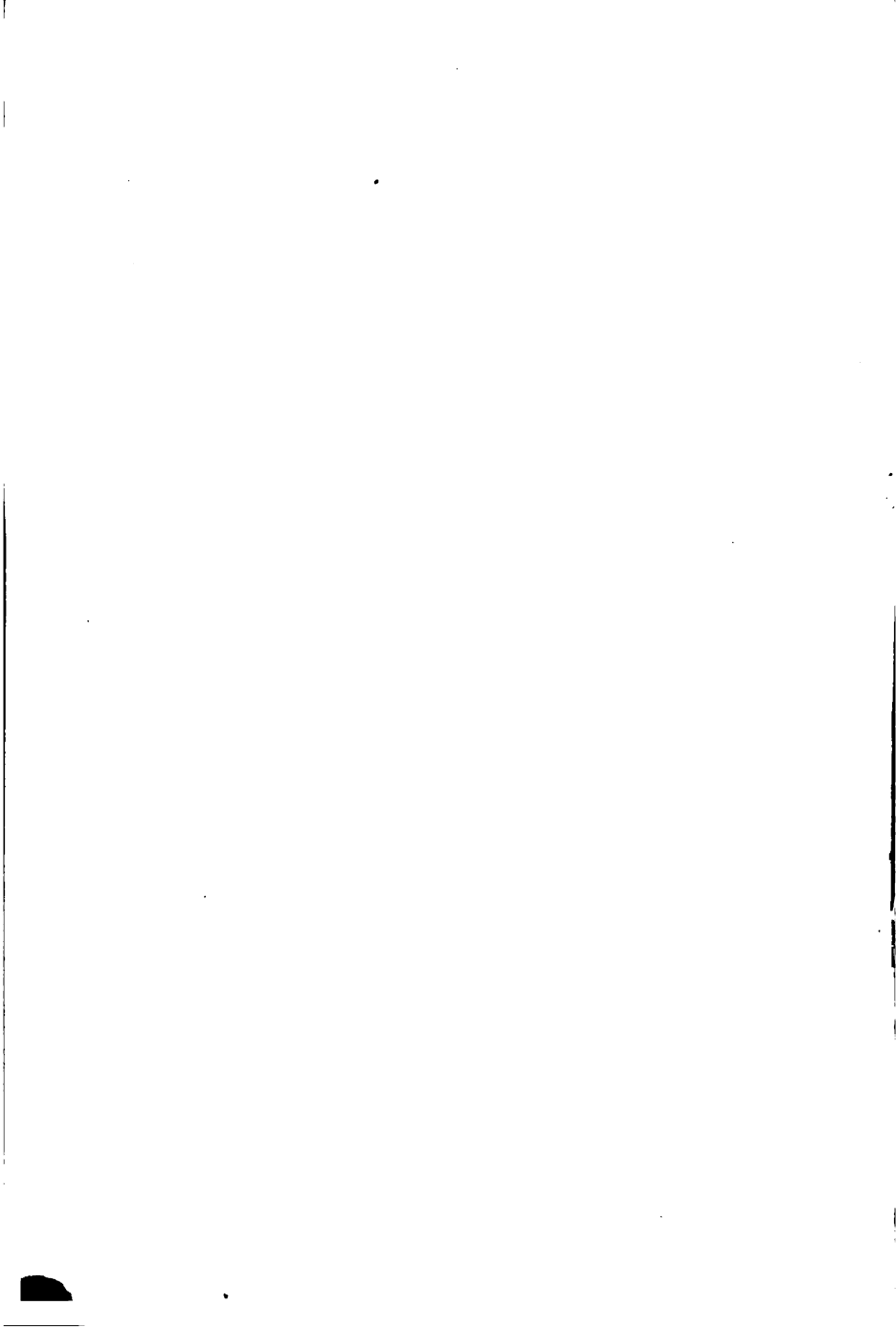
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**POLE BAKER**



# POLE BAKER

## I

HE planter alighted from the dusty little train under the crumbling brick car-shed at Darley, and, turning his heavy hand-luggage over to the negro porter, he walked across the grass to the steps of the Johnston House. Here he was met by Jim Thornton, the dapper young clerk, who always had a curled mustache and oiled hair smoothed flatly down over his brow.

"Oh, here you are, right side up, Captain Duncan!" he cried, cordially. "You can't stay away from those level acres of yours very long at a time."

"No, Jim," the short, thick-set man smiled, as he took the extended hand; "as soon as I heard spring had opened, I got a bad case of homesickness, and we left Florida. My wife and daughter came a week ago. I had to stop on business in Jacksonville. I always like to be here in planting season; my men never seem to know exactly what I want done when I am away. Jim, I've got a lot of fine land out there between the river and the mountains."

"I reckon you have," laughed the clerk, as he

## Pole Baker

led his guest into the hotel office. "There's a neighbor of yours over there at the stove, old Tom Mayhew, who runs the big store—Mayhew & Floyd's—at Springtown."

"Oh, I know him mighty well," said Duncan. "How are you, Mayhew? What are you doing away from your beat? I thought you'd be behind that counter such fine weather as this."

"Trade's dull," said the merchant, who was a tall, spare-made man, about sixty-five years of age, with snow-white hair and beard. "Farmers are all at the plough, and that's where they ought to be, Duncan, if they expect to pay anything on their debts this fall. I had to lay in some stock, and ran down to Atlanta day before yesterday. My young partner, Nelson Floyd, usually does the replenishing, but the books got out of whack and I left him to tussle with them; he's got a better head for figures than I have. I've just sent to the livery-stable for a horse and buggy to take me out; how are you going?"

"Why, I hardly know," answered the planter, as he took off his straw hat and wiped his bald head with a silk handkerchief. "I telegraphed Lawson, my head overseer, to send somebody to meet me, and I was just wondering—"

"Oh, you'll be attended to all right, Captain Duncan," said the clerk, with a laugh, as he stood at the register behind the counter. "Pole Baker was in here last night asking if you had arrived. He said he had brought a buggy and was going to drive you back. You will make it all right if Pole sobers up long enough to get out of town. He was

## Pole Baker

thoroughly 'how-come-you-so' last night. He was in Asque's bar raising holy Cane. The marshal ordered Billy to close at twelve, but Pole wouldn't hear to it, and they came in an inch of having a fight. I believe they would if Mrs. Johnston hadn't heard it and come down. Pole has more respect for women than most men, and as soon as he saw her at the door he hushed up and went to bed."

"He's as straight as a shingle this morning, captain," put in Charlie Smith, a mulatto porter, who was rolling a pair of trucks across the room laden with a drummer's enormous, brass-bound trunk. "He was up before day asking if you got in durin' the night."

"Well, I'm glad he's sobered up if he's to take me out," said the planter. "He's about the biggest dare-devil out our way. You know him, don't you, Mayhew?"

"Know him? Humph! to the extent of over three hundred dollars. My partner thinks the sun rises and sets in him and never will close down on him. They are great friends. Floyd will fight for him at the drop of a hat. He says Pole has more manhood in him to the square inch than any man in the county, white or black. He saw him in a knock-down-and-drag-out row in the public square last election. They say Pole whipped three bigger men than he is all in a bunch, and bare-handed at that. Nobody knows to this day how it started. Nelson doesn't, but I heard it was some remark one of the fellows made about Nelson himself. You know my partner had a rather strange start in life—a poor

## Pole Baker

boy with nobody to see to his bringing-up, but that's a subject that even his best friends don't mention to him."

The captain nodded understandingly. "They tell me Pole used to be a moonshiner," he said; "and I have heard that he was the shrewdest one in the mountains. His wife got him to quit it. I understand he fairly worships the ground she walks on, and there never was a better father to his children."

"He thinks well enough of them when he's at himself," said Mayhew, "but when he's drinking he neglects them awfully. I've known the neighbors to feed them two weeks on a stretch. He's got a few enemies out our way. When he quit moonshining, he helped some of the government officers find some stills over there. That was funny! Pole held off from the job that was offered him for a month, during which time he sent word everywhere through the mountains that he would give all his old friends plenty of time to shut up and quit making whiskey, but after his month was up he would do all he could against any law-breakers. He had to testify against several who are now at large, and they certainly have it in for him. He'd have been shot long ago if his enemies wasn't afraid of him. But they will do him one of these days; you may mark my prediction. He is as cool and collected in time of danger as General Lee used to be. By gum, I saw him actually save the lives of twenty of the best citizens of this town about a year ago."

"You don't mean it!" exclaimed the planter.

"That's what he did, captain," Jim Thornton

## Pole Baker

cried out from behind the counter. "You bet your life that was a ticklish time. I wasn't here, but I heard of it."

"No, you wasn't on duty then," said Mayhew. "I remember that, because Mrs. Johnston had to attend to the office herself. It happened, captain, that a squad of negro soldiers, commanded by a white officer, owing to some wash-out on the road this side of Chattanooga, had to lay over here all day, and they got about half drunk and started in to paint the town. They marched up and down Main Street, two abreast, looking in the stores and making fun of everybody and everything they saw. Finally hell got in them as big as house afire, and they come right in here, forty strong. The leader, a tall, black buck, over six feet high and weighing about two hundred, went up to Mrs. Johnston at the counter and said they wanted dinner. The old lady, feeble and gray-headed as she is, isn't a child. She knew exactly what it meant, and she was as white as a sheet, but she told the rascal quietly that her house did not entertain colored people.

"That's what I've heard," the negro said, 'but we are going to eat here to-day or know the reason why.'"

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Duncan, "he ought to have been shot."

"Well," went on Mayhew, "while she was trying to put him off, somebody ran for the white officer and told him to go order his men out, and he did start in this direction, but it was with a sneer and several questions about why his men couldn't eat in any hotel in America, and so forth, and when he



## Pole Baker

got here in the office he just stood around and took no steps to stop the trouble at all. He sidled over to the cigar-case and stood there twisting his yellow mustache and turning his nose up, but he wouldn't give the command, and that made the negroes more unruly. Mrs. Johnston appealed to him, telling him it was his duty to clear her house of his drunken men, but he simply gave her no satisfaction. However, you can bet trouble was brewing. The news had spread like wildfire down the street, and every merchant and clerk that was any man at all shoved a pistol in his pocket and quietly slid into this room. They didn't seem to have any business here, and it was plain that the captain, who was a Northern man, had no idea he was so near an ambush; but a battle hung by a single hair. Both factions was armed, and one shot would have produced a hundred. The white citizens all had their lips set tight together, and not one had a thing to say to any other. They were all here for simple business, and each man was going to act on his own responsibility. The dining-room was open, and one or two drummers had gone in to dinner, and every white man's eye was on the door. They seemed to have made up their minds, one and all, that the first negro that made a break in that direction would never cross the threshold. I've been in war and carnage, but, by gum! that was the most ticklish situation I ever faced.

"Just about that time I saw Pole Baker run in, panting and out of breath. He had been doing a job of whitewashing down at the wagon-yard and had on a pair of somebody's old overalls that wouldn't meet at the waist and struck him about the knees.

## Pole Baker

He'd lost his hat in his hurry, and his long, bushy hair was all tangled. 'Have you got a spare gun?' he asked me, his lip shaking, his eyes bulging out. I told him I didn't have anything but a pocket-knife and might need that, and he plunged into the bar-room and tried to borrow a pistol from Billy Asque, but Billy was on the way out with his in his hip-pocket, and Pole come back frothing at the mouth and begun to look under that stove there.

"'What you looking for?' said I. And he belched up an oath and said: 'Damn it, what you think I'm looking for—a feather bed? I'm looking for something to hit that black whelp with that's leaning over the register threatening that poor old lady.'

"But he couldn't lay his hand on a thing, and it looked like he was about to cry. Then things got more serious. The negroes had bunched together, and we saw plainly that their plan was to make a break in a body for the dining-room. I saw Pole throw his big head back like our general used to do when things had reached a crisis.

"'If something isn't done, and done quick,' I heard him say to himself, 'some of the best citizens of this town will lose their lives, and all for a gang of drunken niggers. Something's got to be done, Mr. Mayhew,' he said to me.

"'Yes, but *what?*—that's the question,' said I.

"Then I saw him act. Without a single weapon in his hand, he stalked as straight as an arrow through the gang of negroes, elbowing them right and left, and went up to the captain and clamped his hand on his shoulder so heavy that I heard it clear across the room.

## Pole Baker

“‘Looky’ here, you damned white coward!’ he said, ‘you order them coons out of here in five seconds or, by God, I’ll knock every tooth in your head down your throat, and wedge ’em in with your gums. Quick, order, I say!’

“The chap was about Pole’s height, but he looked like a sapling beside a knotted oak, and he stared through his cigar smoke in astonishment. But Pole’s left hand came down with a ringing slap on his shoulder-straps that almost brought the fellow to his knees, and Pole’s big fist slid up close to his eyes, and then drew back for a sledge-hammer lick. The fellow blinked, and then with a growl and a sickly look about the mouth he gave the order. The negroes looked at him in astonishment, but Pole waved his big right hand and said, ‘Get out! get out of here, and that mighty quick!’ They moved slow, to be sure, but they went, the officer standing to one side looking plumb whipped. They had all gone down the steps, and the captain, mad and sullen, was about to follow, when suddenly Pole reached out and caught him by the collar and yanked him right back into the crowd that was surging forward.

“‘Say, you’ve got to listen to a speech,’ Pole said, still holding to his coat. ‘I want to tell you that for a soldier you are the damnedest jackass that ever stood on its hind-legs in blue pants. You are a pretty excuse to send out even in charge of a set of ignorant coons. If it hadn’t been for me calling a halt on this thing you’d ’a’ had to haul your company to headquarters in a refrigerator-car, and you’d ’a’ had that uniform changed to one of tar

## Pole Baker

and feathers. Now, you go on, and when you strike another mountain town you will know what you are up against,' and with that Pole led the chap, who was pretty well scared by that time, to the steps and gave him a shove towards the train. Pole saved the day, and when that crowd of Darley men realized what a riot had been averted they gathered around him and began to praise him extravagantly. Billy Askew ran into his bar and came out with his old dog-eared ledger open at Pole's account, and he held it up and tore the page out. 'No man,' said he, 'can owe *me* for whiskey that's got that sort of a body to put it in, and Pole Baker from this day on is at liberty to stick his mouth to every bung-hole in my shop.'

"And that night Pole was so drunk that the marshal started to lock him up, but the gang stood to him. They put him to bed up-stairs in the bridal-chamber, and sat around him till morning, singing battle-songs and raising the devil generally."

"I see him coming now, Mr. Mayhew," said the clerk. "Captain, he walks steady enough. I reckon he'll take you through safe."

The tall countryman, about thirty-five years of age, without a coat, his coarse cotton shirt open at the neck, a slouched hat on his massive head and his tattered trousers stuffed into the tops of his high boots, came in. He wore a brown, sweeping mustache, and his eyebrows were unusually heavy. On the heel of his right boot he wore an old riding spur, very loosely strapped.

"How are you, Captain Duncan?" he said to the

## Pole Baker

planter, as he extended his brawny hand. "You've come back to God's country, heigh?"

"Yes, Baker," the planter returned, with a genial smile. "I had to see what sort of chance you fellows stand for a crop this year. I understand Lawson sent you over for me and my baggage. I'm certainly glad he engaged a man about whom I have heard such good reports."

"Well, I don't know about *that*, captain," said Pole, his bushy brows meeting in a frown of displeasure, and his dark eyes flashing. "I don't know as I'm runnin' a hack-line, or totin' trunks about fer the upper-ten set of humanity. I'm a farmer *myself*, in a sort of way—smaller 'n you are, but a farmer. I was comin' this way yesterday, and was about to take my own hoss out of the field, where he had plenty to do, when Lawson said: 'Baker, bein' as you are goin' to make the trip *anyways*, I'd feel under obligations ef you'd take my rig and fetch Captain Duncan back when you come.' By gum, to tell you the truth, I've just come in to say to you, old hoss, that ef you are ready right now, we'll ride out together; ef not, I'll leave yore rig and go out with Nathan Porter. I say engaged! I'm not goin' to get any money out o' this job."

"Oh, I meant no offence at all, Baker," said the planter, in no little embarrassment, for the group was smiling.

"Well, I reckon you didn't," said Pole, slightly mollified, "but it's always a good idea fer two men to know exactly where they stand, and I'm here to say I don't take off my hat to no man on earth. The only man I'd bow down to died two thousand years ago."

## Pole Baker

"That's the right spirit," Duncan said, admiringly. "Now, I'm ready if you are, and it's time we were on the move. Those two valises are mine, and that big overcoat tied in a bundle."

"Here, Charlie!" Pole called out to the porter, "put them things o' Duncan's in the back end o' the buggy an' I'll throw you a dime the next time I'm in town."

"All right, boss," the mulatto said, with a knowing wink and smile at Mayhew. "They'll be in by the time you get there."

While the planter was at the counter saying good-bye to the clerk, Pole looked down at Mayhew. "When are *you* goin' out?" he asked.

"In an hour or so," answered the merchant, as he spat down into a cuspadore. "I'm waiting now for a turnout, and I've got some business to attend to."


"Collections to make, I'll bet my hat," Pole laughed. "I thought mighty few folks was out on Main Street jest now; they know you are abroad in the land, an' want to save the'r socks."

"Do you reckon that's it, Baker?" said Mayhew, as he spat again. "I thought maybe it was because they was afraid you'd git on the war-path, and wanted to keep their skins whole."

The clerk and the planter laughed. "He got you that time, Pole," the latter said, with a smile.

"I'll acknowledge the corn," and the mountaineer joined in the laugh good-naturedly. "To look at the old skinflint, settin' half asleep all the time, a body wouldn't think his tongue had any life to it. But I've seen the dern thing wiggle before. It was when thar was a trade up, though."

## II

S they were driving into the country road, just beyond the straggling houses in the outskirts of the town, going towards the mountains, which lay along the western horizon like blue clouds settling to earth, the planter said:

"I've seen you fishing and hunting with Mayhew's young partner, Nelson Floyd. You and he are rather intimate, are you not?"

"Jest about as friendly as two men can be," said Pole, "when one's rising in the world an' t'other is eternally at a stand-still or goin' down like a round rock on the side of a mountain. Or maybe I ought to say, when one of 'em has had the pluck to educate hisse'f, an' t'other hardly knows B from a bull's foot. I don't know, captain, why Nelson Floyd's friendly to me. I like him beca'se he is a man from his toe-nails to the end o' the longest hair on his head."

"I've heard a lot of good things about him," remarked the planter, "and I understand, too, that he has his faults."

"They're part of his manhood," said Pole, philosophically. "Show me a feller without faults, and I'll show you one that's too weak to have 'em. Nelson's got some o' the dust o' the broad road on

## Pole Baker

his coat, an' yet I'd take his place in the general stampede when old Gabe blows his trumpet at the millennium a sight quicker than I'd stand in the shoes o' some o' these jack-leg preachers. I tell you, Captain Duncan, ef the Lord's goin' to make favorites o' some o' the long-faced hypocrits I know, that is robbin' widows an' orphans in the week an' prayin' an' shoutin' on Sunday to pull the wool over folks' eyes, me an' Him won't gee in the hereafter. You know some'n about that boy's start in life, don't you, captain?"

"Not much, I must own," answered the planter.

"Thar it is," said Pole, with a condemning sneer; "ef the pore boy had belonged to one o' the big families in yore ring out in Murray—the high an' mighty, that owned niggers, you'd 'a' heard all about him. Captain, nobody on earth knows how that feller has suffered. All his life he's wanted to make some'n of hisse'f, an' has absolutely, to my certain knowledge, had more to contend with than any man alive. He don't even know the exact date of his birth, an' ain't plumb-sure that his name really is Floyd. You see, jest at the close of the war a woman—so sick she could hardly walk—come through the Union lines in East Tennessee with a baby in her arms. Accordin' to report, she claimed that her name was Floyd, an' called the baby 'Nelson.' She put up at a mountain cabin for the night, a shack whar some pore razor-back whites lived by name o' Perdue. Old man Perdue was a lyin', treacherous scamp, a bushwhacker and a mountain outlaw, an' his wife was a good mate to him. Nelson's mammy, as I say, was tuck in, but thar



## Pole Baker

wasn't no doctor nigh, an' very little to eat, an' the next mornin' she was ravin' out of her head, and late that day she died. I'm tellin' you now all that Nelson Floyd ever was able to find out, as it come down to him from one person's recollection to another's. Well, the woman was buried somers, nobody knows whar, an' old Mrs. Perdue kept the baby more beca'se she was afeard to put it out o' the way than fer any pity fer it. She had a whole litter of brats of her own goin' about winter an' summer in the'r shirt-tails, an' so she left Nelson to scratch fer hisself. Then the authorities made it hot fer Perdue on some charges agin 'im, and he left the child with another mountain family by name o' Scott and moved clean out of the country. The Scotts couldn't remember much more than hearsay about how Nelson got thar, an' they didn't care, though they tried to raise the boy along with three of their own. He had a tough time of it, for he was a plucky little devil, and had a fight with somebody mighty nigh every day. And as he grewed up he naturally fell into bad company, or it fell into him like everything else did, an' he tuck to drinkin' an' finally become a regular young outlaw; he was a bloodthirsty rowdy before he was fifteen; shot at one man fer some cause or other an' barely escaped bein' put up fer life—nothin' but bein' so young got 'im off. But one day—now I'm givin' it to you jist as Nelson told me—one day he said he got to thinkin' about the way he was a-goin', and all of his own accord he made up his mind to call a halt. He wanted to cut clean off from his old set, an' so he went to Mayhew, at Springtown, and told him he

## Pole Baker

wanted to git work in the store. Old Mayhew would skin a flea fer its hide an' tallow, an', seein' his money in the boy, he bound 'im to an agreement to work fer his bare board an' clothes fer three years."

"Low enough wages, certainly!" exclaimed the planter.

"Yes, but Nelson didn't grumble, and Mayhew will tell you hisself that thar never was sech a worker sence the world was made. He was a general hand at ever'thing, and as bright as a new dollar and as quick as a steel-trap. The Lord only knows when or how he did it, fer nobody ever seed a book in his hands in business hours, but he l'arned to read and write and figure. An' that wasn't all. Old Mayhew was sech an old skinflint, and so hard on folks who got in his debt, that nobody traded at his shebang except them that couldn't go anywhars else; but lo and behold! Nelson made so many friends that they begun to flock around 'im from all directions, an' the business of the house was more than doubled. Mayhew knowed the cause of it, fer lots o' customers throwed it up to 'im. The prosperity was almost too much fer the old skunk; in fact, he got mighty nigh scared at it, and actually tried to dam the stream o' profit. To keep up sech a business, big credit had to be extended, and it was a new venture fer the cautious old scamp. But Nelson had perfect faith in all his friends, and thar it stood—a beardless boy holdin' forth that it was the old man's chance of a lifetime to git rich, and Mayhew half believin' it, crazy to act on Nelson's judgment, an' yet afraid it would be ruination. That was at the

## Pole Baker

close of the boy's three-year contract. He was then about twenty year old, and I was in the store and heard the talk between 'em. We was all a-settin' at the big wood stove in the back end—me an' the old man, an' Nelson, and Joe Peters, a clerk, who is still there but was then workin' on trial. I shall never forget that night as long as I live. I gloried in Nelson's spunk to sech an extent I could 'a' throwed up my hat an' hollered.

"'I've been waitin' to have a talk with you, Mr. Mayhew,' the boy said. 'Our contract is out to-day, and you and me disagree so much about runnin' the business that I hardly know what I ought to do an' not stand in my own light. We've got to make a fresh contract, anyway.'

"'I knowed that was comin',' old Mayhew said, with one o' his big, hoggish grunts. 'People for miles around have made it the'r particular business to fill you up with ideas about what you are wuth. I've thought some about lettin' you go an' see ef me an' Joe cayn't keep things a-movin'; but you know the trade round here, an' I want to do the fair thing. What do you think yore time's wuth?'" Pole laughed. "The old skunk was usin' exactly the same words he'd 'a' used ef he'd been startin' in to buy a load o' produce an' wanted to kill expectation at the outset.

"'I want fifty dollars a month, *under certain conditions*,' the boy said, lookin' the old skinflint straight in the eye.

"'Fifty—huh! yo're crazy—stark, starin' crazy, plumb off yore base!' the old man said, his lip twisted up like it is when he's mad. 'I see myse'f

## Pole Baker

payin' a beardless boy a Broadway salary to work in a shack like this out here in the mountains.'

"'Well, I'll jest be obliged to quit you then,' Nelson said, as steady as a mill-pond on a hot day in August, 'an' I'd sorter hate to do it. Moore & Trotter at Darley offer me that fer the fust six months, with an increase later.'

"'Moore & Trotter!' the old skunk grunted loud enough to be heard clean to the court-house across the street. They was the only firm in this end o' the state that controlled as much custom as Mayhew did, an' it struck the old chump under the ribs. He got up from his chair an' walked clean down to the front-door. It was shet an' locked; but thar was a lamp on the show-case nigh whar he stopped, an' I could see his old face a-workin' under the influence o' good an' evil. Purty soon he grunted, an' come back, thumpin' his old stick agin barrels an' boxes along the way.

"'How am I goin' to know whether Moore & Trotter offered you that much or not?' he axed.

"'Beca'se I said so,' Nelson told 'im, an' his dark eyes was flashin' like lightnin'. He stood up an' faced the old codger. 'I'll tell you one thing, Mr. Mayhew,' he let fly at 'im, 'ef you don't know whether I'm tellin' the truth or not you'd better not keep me, fer a man that will lie will steal. I say they offered me fifty dollars. I've got the'r written proposition in my pocket, but I'll be hanged ef I show it to you!'"

"Good!" exclaimed the planter.

"Well, it knocked the old man clean off his feet,"

## Pole Baker

Pole went on. "He sat down in his chair again, all of a tremble, an' white about the mouth. Stingy folks git scared to death at the very idea o' payin' out money, anyway, an' stingy don't fit that old cuss. Ef Noah Webster had knowed him he'd 'a' made another word fer that meanin'. ~~I~~ I don't know but he'd simply 'a' spelled out the old man's name an' 'a' been done with it."

"What final answer did Mayhew give the young man, Baker?" asked the planter, in a tone which indicated no little interest.

"Why, he jest set still fer a while," said Pole, "an' me an' Joe Peters was a-wonderin' what he'd say. He never did anything sudden. Ef he ever gits to heaven he'll feel his way through the gate an' want to know ef thar's any other entrance. I seed 'im keep a woman standin' in the store once from breakfast to dinner time while he was lookin' fer a paper o' needles she'd called fer. Every now an' then he'd quit huntin' fer the needles an' go an' wait on some other customer, an' then come back to 'er. She was a timid sort o' thing, an' didn't seem to think she had the right to leave, bein' as she had started the search. Whenever she'd go towards the door to see ef her hoss was standin', he'd call 'er back an' ax 'er about 'er crap an' tell 'er not to be in a hurry, that Rome wasn't built in a day, an' the like. You know the old cuss has some education. Finally he found the needles an' tuck another half an' hour to select a scrap o' paper little enough to wrap 'em up in. But you axed me what Nelson said to 'im. Huh! the boy was too good a trader to push a matter like that to a head. He'd throwed down the bars,

## Pole Baker

an' he jest waited fer the old man to come into the grass of his own accord. Finally Mayhew axed, as indifferent as he could under all his excitement: 'When do you intend to answer the letter you say you got from Moore & Trotter?'

"'I expect to answer it to-night,' Nelson said. 'I shall tell 'em I appreciate the'r offer an' will run over an' see 'em day after to-morrow.'"

"Good! very well said, Baker," laughed Captain Duncan. "No wonder the young man's got rich. You can't keep talent like that down. But what did old Mayhew say?"

"It was like pullin' eye-teeth," answered Pole. "But he finally come across. 'Well,' said he, 'I reckon you kin make yorese'f as useful to me as you kin to them, an' ef you are bent on ridin' me to death, after I picked you up, an' give you a start, an' l'arnt you how to do business, I reckon I'll have to put up with it.'"

"'I don't feel like I owe you anything,' said Nelson, as plucky as a banker demandin' good security on a loan. 'I've worked for you like a slave for three years for my bare livin' an' my experience, an' from now on I am goin' to work for number one. I said that I'd stay for fifty dollars a month *on certain conditions.*'"

"'Conditions?' the old man growled. 'What conditions do you mean?'

"'Why, it's jest this,' said Nelson. 'I've had my feelin's, an' the feelin's o' my friends, hurt time after time by you turnin' 'em away without credit, when I knowed they would meet the'r obligations. Now, ef I stay with you, it is with the distinct under-

## Pole Baker

standin' that I have the authority to give or refuse credit whenever I see fit.'

"That knocked the old man off his perch ag'in. He wilted an' sat thar as limp as a dish-rag. Joe Peters worships the ground Nelson walks on, an', as much as he fears the old man, he busted out in a big chuckle an' rubbed his hands together. Besides, he knowed Nelson was talkin' fer the interest o' the business. He'd seed no end o' good customers sent off fer no reason in the world than that Mayhew was scared o' his shadow.

"'I'll never consent to *that*, anyway,' Mayhew said, mighty nigh clean whipped out.

"'Well, Moore & Trotter *will*,' Nelson said. 'That's one o' the things laid down in the'r proposition.' An' the boy went to the desk an' drawed out a sheet o' paper an' dipped his pen in the ink. The old man set quiverin' awhile, an' then got up an' went an' stood behind the boy. 'Put down yore pen,' said he, with a deep sigh from away down inside of 'im. 'It would ruin me fer you to move to Darley—half the trade would follow you. Go ahead, I'll keep you, an' run the risk.'"

The planter had been listening attentively, and he now said, admiringly: "Even at that early age the boy was showing the talent that developed later. It wasn't long after that, I believe, before he became the old man's partner."

"The next year," answered Pole. "He saved every dollar of his wages and made some good investments that turned out money. It wasn't a big slice of the business at fust, but he owns a half now, an', countin' his outside interests, he's

## Pole Baker

wuth as much as old Mayhew. He's rich already, captain."

"So I've heard the women say," smiled the planter. "Women always keep track of well-to-do unmarried men."

"It hain't spiled Nelson one bit, nuther," added Baker. "He's the same unselfish friend to me as he ever was, and I hain't hardly got a roof to cover me an' mine. But as solid as he always was, he had a serious back-set about three years ago, and all his well-wishers thought it was goin' to do him up."

"You mean when he took to drinking," said Captain Duncan, interrogatively.

"Yes, that's what I mean. He'd formed the habit when he was a boy, and along with his prosperity an' late work-hours it begun to fasten its claws on 'im like it has on some other folks I know, captain. He had a lot o' night work to do, an' Thigpen's bar was right 'j'inin' the store. Nelson used to slide in at the back-door whenever the notion struck 'im; and he made the trail hot, I tell you. Old Mayhew kept a sharp eye on 'im, an' every now an' then he'd git powerful blue over the way things was a-goin'. Finally the old cuss got desperate an' called a halt. He had a straight talk with Nelson, an' told 'im they would have to divide the'r interests, that he wasn't a drinkin' man hisse'f, an' he didn't want to be yoked to a feller that was soaked half the time. It fetched the boy to his senses. He come over to my house that night an' called me out to the fence.

"I want to make a deal with you, Pole," said he.

"With me?" says I. "What sort of a deal?"



## Pole Baker

“‘Why,’ said he, ‘I’ve made up my mind to swear off fer good an’ all, an’ I want you to jine me.’

“I agreed all right,” Pole laughed. “In fact, I was sorter in that business; I’d promised every preacher an’ temperance worker in the county to quit, an’ I couldn’t refuse a friend what I was dispensin’ so freely right an’ left. So I said, said I: ‘All right, Nelson, I’m with you.’”

“And how did it come out?” questioned the planter, as he bowed to a wagonful of farmers going in an opposite direction.

“His vaccination tuck,” Pole smiled. “He had a mighty sore arm fer a week or so, but he helt out. As fer me, I was so dern glad to see his success in abstainin’ that I started in to celebrate. I did try, though. One mornin’ I went in the store an’ seed Nelson have sech a clean, prosperous look an’ so well satisfied with his stand that I went out with fresh resolutions. What did I do? I went to the bar-room an’ bought four pint bottles o’ red rye an’ tuck ‘em home with me. I set ‘em all in a straight row on the mantel-shelf, nigh the edge, in front o’ the clock, an’ was standin’ lookin’ at ‘em when Sally, my wife, come in. She seed the display, an’ jest set kerflop down in her chair an’ begun to whimper.

“‘You hold on!’ said I; ‘don’t you cross a foot-log till the tree’s down. I’m tryin’ a new dicker. I’ve always heard that “familiarity breeds contempt,” an’ I’ve also heard that “the hair o’ the dog is good fer the bite.” Now, I’ve tried my level best to quit liquor by stayin’ away from it, an’ I’m

## Pole Baker

a-goin' to see ef I cayn't do it with its eye on me all the time.' Well, sir, the sweet little woman—she's a sweet, dear little creature, Captain Duncan, ef I do say it myse'f."

"I've always heard so, Baker," the planter said. "She's very popular with your neighbors."

"An' I'm jest t'other way," said Pole. "Well, Sally she got up an' kissed me, an' said that somehow she felt like my plan would work."

"And did it?—I mean"—the captain recalled Pole's spree of only the night before—"I mean, did it work for any length of time?"

"I was goin' on to tell you," answered the mountaineer. "That night fer the fust time sence my marriage I woke smack dab in the middle o' the night, an' as I laid thar in the room filled with moonlight I couldn't see a blessed thing but that row o' bottles, an' then my mouth set in to waterin' at sech a rate that I got afeard I'd ketch my death from sleepin' on a wet pillow. It was certainly a struggle with the flesh. I'd put my thirst, captain, when she's good an' dry, ag'in any that ever tickled a human throat. It ud take the blue ribbon at a convention o' drunkards. It's a rale thing; it kin walk, an' talk, an' kick, an' squirm, but it won't be dictated to. Finally Sally woke up an' said:

"'What's the matter, Pole? Hain't you comfortable?'

"'Comfortable the devil!' said I—I'm usually polite to Sally, but I felt like that wasn't no time an' place to talk about little matters. 'Comfortable nothin',' said I. 'Sally, ef you don't take that "dog-

## Pole Baker

hair" out o' this house an' hide it, I'll be as drunk as a b'iled owl in ten minutes.'

"'Dog-hair?' said she, an' then the little woman remembered, an' she got up. I heard the bottles tinkle like sorrowful good-bye bells callin' wanderin' friends back to the fold as she tuck 'em up an' left. Captain, I felt jest like"—Pole laughed good-naturedly—"I felt like thar was a mean, stinkin' plot agin the best friends I ever had. I actually felt sorry fer them thar bottles, an' I got up an' stood at the window an' watched Sally as she tuck 'em away out in the lonely moonlight to the barn. I seed 'er climb over the fence o' the cow-lot an' go in at the side whar I kept my hay an' fodder an' roughness fer my cattle. Then I laid down in bed ag'in."

"You acted right," said the planter; "and you deserve credit for putting your foot down so firmly on what you felt was so injurious, even, even"—the captain came back again to reality—"even if you didn't remain firm very long afterwards."

"Well, I'll tell you one thing—" The ex-moon-shiner laughed again, and his eyes twinkled. "It tuck Sally longer, it seemed to me, to git to sleep after she got back than it ever had in all her life. Of all times on earth, she wanted to talk. But I shet her off. I made like I was breathin' good an' deep, an' then she set in, too. What did I do? Captain Duncan, I spent the best half o' that night out in the barn lookin' fer hens' nests. I found two, an' had to be put to bed at sun-up."

The planter laughed. "There is one good thing about the situation, Baker," he said, "and that is

## Pole Baker

your making a joke of it. I believe you will get the under-hold of the thing some day and throw it over. Coming back to your friend Floyd, it's true he gave up whiskey, but if reports are reliable he has another fault that is quite as bad."

"Oh, you mean all that talk about that girl," answered the mountaineer.

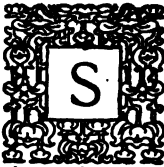
"Yes, Baker, a reputation of that sort is not a desirable thing in any community. I know that many brainy and successful men hold that kind of thing lightly, but it will down anybody who tampers with it."

"Now, look here, captain," Pole said, sharply; "don't you be an old woman! 'Ain't you got more sense 'an to swallow everything that passes among idle gossips in these mountains? Nelson Floyd has got a backbone full o' the fire o' youth an' is a hot-blooded young chap, but he's, to my positive knowledge, one o' the cleanest boys I ever come across. To tell you the truth, I don't believe he ever made but that one slip. It got out, unfortunately, an' beca'se he was rich an' prominent it raised a regular whirlwind o' talk an' exaggeration. If it had happened to half a dozen other young men round about here, not a word would 'a' been said."

"Oh, I see," smiled the planter, "he's not as black as he's painted, then."

"Not by a jugful," said the farmer. "I tell you he's all right, an' folks will know it 'fore long."

### III

PRINGTOWN was about twelve miles west of Darley, only a mile from Captain Duncan's house, and half a mile from Pole Baker's humble cottage and small farm. The village had a population of about two hundred souls. It was the county-seat, and the court-house, a simple, ante-bellum brick structure, stood in the centre of the public square, around which were clustered the one-storied shops, lawyer's offices, cotton warehouses, hotel, and general stores.

Chief among the last mentioned was the well-known establishment of Mayhew & Floyd. It was a long, frame building, once white but now a murky gray, a tone which nothing but the brush of time and weather could have given it.

It was only a week since Captain Duncan's talk with Pole Baker, and a bright, inspiring morning, well suited to the breaking of the soil and the planting of seed. The village was agog with the spirit of hope. The post-office was filled with men who had come for their mail, and they stood and chatted about the crops on the long veranda of the hotel and in the front part of Mayhew & Floyd's store. Pole Baker was in the store talking with Joe Peters, the clerk, about seed potatoes, when a

## Pole Baker

tall countryman, in the neighborhood of forty-five years of age, slouched in and leaned heavily against the counter.

"I want a box o' forty-four cartridges," he said, drawing out a long revolver and rapping on the counter with the butt of it.

"What! you goin' squirrel huntin'?" Peters laughed and winked at Pole. "That gun's got a long enough barrel to send a ball to the top o' the highest tree in these mountains."

"You slide around behind thar an' git me them cartridges!" retorted the customer. "Do yore talk-in' to somebody else. I'll hunt what an' whar I want to, I reckon."

"Oh, come off yore perch, Jeff Wade!" the clerk said, with another easy laugh. "You hain't nobody's daddy! But here you are. Forty cents a box, full count, every one warranted to make a hole an' a noise. Want me to charge 'em?"

"No, I don't; do you hear me?—I don't! An', what's more, I want to know exactly how much I owe this dern house. I've been to a dozen money-lenders 'fore I found what I wanted, but I got it, an' I want to pay what I owe Mayhew & Floyd."

Just then Pole Baker stepped up to the man's side, and, looking under the broad brim of his hat, he said:

"Looky' here, Jeff Wade, what you shootin' off yore mouth fer? I 'lowed at fust that you was full, but you hain't drinkin', at least you don't seem to have no bottle on yore person."

"Drinkin' hell! No, I'm not drinkin', an', what's more, I don't intend to let a drap pass down my

## Pole Baker

throat till I've done my duty to me an' mine. Say, you look good an' see ef I'm drinkin'! See ef you think a man that's in liquor would have as steady a nerve as I've got. You watch me! Maybe it 'll show you what I'm able to do."

Turning, he stalked out of the store, and Peters and Pole followed, watching him in wonder. He strode across the street to the court-house, loading his revolver as he went. Reaching the closed door of the building, he took an envelope from his pocket and fastened it to the panel by thrusting the blade of his big pocket-knife into it several times. The spectators heard the hollow, resounding blows like the strokes of a carpenter's hammer, and then Wade turned and came back towards them.

"By gum, he's off his nut!" said Peters, seriously. "He's as crazy as a bed-bug."

"It's my opinion he's jest comin' to his senses," Pole mused, a troubled look in his eyes. "Yes, that's about it; he's jest wakin' up, an' the whole county will know it, too. By gum, I hate this—I hate it!"

"You hate what?" asked Peters, his eyes on the farmer, who was now quite near them. Pole made no reply, for Wade was by his side on the brick walk beneath the wooden shed in front of the store, his revolver swinging at his side.

"You fellows keep yore eye on that envelope," said Wade, and he cocked his revolver.

"Look here, don't make a damn fool o' yorese'f," said Pole Baker, and he laid a remonstrating hand on the iron arm of the gaunt mountaineer. "You know it's agin the ordinance. You know you'll git

## Pole Baker

into trouble; you listen to the advice of a friend. Put up that gun an' go home!"

"I'm my own boss, damn it!" snarled the man with the weapon.

"Yes, an' a dern fool, too," answered Baker.

"Well, that's my lookout." Wade glared over his shoulder into the store and raised his voice significantly. "I want to show this damn town how easy it will be fer me to put three shots into the blackest heart that ever pumped human blood."

"You'd better mind what yo're about, Jeff Wade." Pole Baker was pale, his lips were tight, his eyes flashing.

"I know what I'm about. I'm tryin' to draw a coward from his den. I'm not shore—I'm not dead shore, mind you—but I'm mighty nigh it. Ef the guilty stand an' hear what I'm a-sayin' an' don't take it up, they are wuss than hell-tainted. You watch that white mark."

The bystanders, several comprehending, stood rigid. Pole Baker stared. Wade raised his revolver, aimed steadily at the mark, and fired three shots in quick succession.

"Thar!" said the marksman, with grim triumph; "as bad as my sight is, I kin see 'em from here."

"By gum, they are thar!" exclaimed Peters, with a strange, inquiring look into Pole Baker's set face. "They are thar, Pole."

"You bet they are thar, an' some 'll be in another spot 'fore long," said Wade. "Now, Peters, you go in the house an' bring me my account. I've got the money."

Wonderingly, the clerk obeyed. Pole went into



## Pole Baker

the store behind him, and, as Peters stood at the big ledger writing, Pole stepped up to Nelson Floyd, who sat near a window in the rear with a newspaper in front of him.

"Did you hear all that, Nelson?" the farmer asked.

"Did I? Of course I did. Wasn't it intended for—" The young merchant glanced furtively at Peters and paused. His handsome, dark face was set as from tense, inward struggle.

There was a pause. Peters went towards the front, a written account drying in the air as he waved it to and fro.

"I was about to ask you if—" the young merchant began, but Pole interrupted him.

"Hush, listen!"

There was the sound of clinking coin on the counter below. The cast-iron bell on the cash-drawer rang harshly as the clerk put the money away.

"Thar, I'm even with this dirty shebang!" It was Jeff Wade's raised voice. "An' I kin act when the proper time comes. Oh, you all know what I'm talkin' about! Nobody kin hide a thing in these mountains. But you'll understand it better ef it ever comes into yore own families. I never had but one little sister—she was all the Lord ever allowed me to have. She was married not more 'n a month ago an' went off to Texas with a man who believes in 'er an' swears he will make her a good husband an' protector. But no sooner was the pore little thing gone than all this talk set in. It was writ out to her, an' she writ back to me to stop it. She admitted it was true, but wouldn't lay

## Pole Baker

the blame. Folks say they know, but they won't talk. They are afeard o' the influence o' money an' power, I reckon, but it will git out. I have my suspicions, but I'm not yet dead shore; but I will be, an' what I done fer that scrap o' paper I will do fer that man, ef God don't paralyze this right arm. Ef the black-hearted devil is within the sound o' my voice at this minute, an' stays still, he's not only the thief of woman's happiness, but he's wuss than a coward. He's a sneakin' son of—"

Nelson Floyd, his face rigid, sprang up and went into Joe Peters's little bedroom, which was cut off in one corner of the store, and, opening the top drawer of an old bureau, he took out a revolver. Turning, he met in the door-way the stalwart form of Pole Baker.

"Put down that gun, Nelson! put it down!" Pole commanded. "Jeff Wade's deliberately set this trap to draw you into it, an' the minute you walk down thar it will be a public acknowledgment, an' he'll kill you 'fore you kin bat an eye."

"No doubt," said Nelson Floyd, "but the fellow has his rights. I could never draw a free breath if I let this pass. I owe it to the poor devil, Pole, and I'll pay. That has always been my rule. I'll pay. Stand aside!"

"I'll be damned ef I do." Pole stood his ground firmly. "You must listen to reason. It's deliberate death."

"Get out of the way, Pole; don't make me mad," said Floyd. "I'm going down. I'd expect him to pay me, and I shall him."

"Stop! You are a fool—you are a damned hot-

## Pole Baker

headed simpleton, Nelson Floyd. Listen to me." Pole caught the revolver and held on to the barrel of it while the young merchant clutched the butt. "Listen to me, I say. Are you goin' back on a helpless little woman? After you have had yore fun, an' the pore little trick gets married to a man who believes in her, an' goes away off an' is on a fair road to happiness, are you, I say, a-goin' to publicly advertise her shame, an', no doubt, bust up a contented home?"

"Great God, Pole!" exclaimed Floyd, as he sank onto the edge of Peters's bed, "do you think, if I give Wade satisfaction it will—"

"Will it? It will be in every paper from Maine to Californy. Meddlesome devils will mark the articles an' mail 'em to the gal's husband. A lot o' folks did the'r level best to bust up the match, anyway, by talkin' to him about you an' others."

Nelson Floyd stared at the floor and slowly nodded his head.

"I'm caught in a more degradin' trap than the one Wade set for me," he declared, bitterly. "My acts have branded me as a coward and left me without power to vindicate myself. That's one of the ways Providence has of punishing a poor devil. A man may have a good impulse, but can't act upon it owing to the restrictions laid on him by his very sins."

Pole looked down into the store.

"Never mind," he said, gloomily. "Wade's gone."

Floyd dropped the revolver into the drawer of the bureau, and went back to his desk.

"It's only a question of time, Pole," he said. "He

## Pole Baker

suspects me now, but is not sure. It won't be long before the full story will reach him, and then we'll have to meet. As far as I am concerned, I'd rather have had it over with. I've swallowed a bitter pill this mornin', Pole."

"Well, it wasn't a lead one." Baker's habitual sense of humor was rising to the surface. "Most any sort o' physic's better 'n cold metal shoved into the system through its own hole."

There was a step in the store. Pole looked down again.

"It's old Mayhew," he said. "I'm powerful glad he was late this mornin', Nelson. The old codger would have seed through that talk."

"Yes, he would have seen through it," answered Floyd, despondently, as he opened a big ledger and bent over it. Mayhew trudged towards them, his heavy cane knocking against the long dry-goods counter.

"I'll have the law on that fellow," he growled, as he hung his stick on its accustomed nail behind the stove. "No rampageous dare-devil like that can stand right in my front-door and shoot for mere amusement at the county court-house. This isn't a fort yet, and the war is over, thank the Lord."

Pole glanced at Floyd.

"Oh, he's jest a little hilarious this mornin', Mr. Mayhew," he said. "He must 'a' met a mountain whiskey wagon on his way to town. Anyways, you needn't complain; he come in here jest now an' paid off his account in full."

"What? paid off— Is that so, Nelson?"

## Pole Baker

Floyd nodded, and then bent more closely over the ledger. "Yes, he paid up to date."

"Well, that's queer—or I am, one or the other; why, boys, I had that fellow on my dead-list. I didn't think he'd ever raise the money, and if he did I had no idea it would drift our way."

Floyd left the desk and reached for his hat. Pole was watching him closely.

"Post-office?" he asked.

"Yes." Pole joined him, and the two walked part of the way to the front-door and paused. Joe Peters was attending a man on the grocery side of the house, and a young woman, neatly dressed, with a pretty figure and graceful movement, stood waiting her turn.

"By gum!" Pole exclaimed under his breath, "that's my little neighbor, Cynthia Porter—the purtiest, neatest, an' best little trick that ever wore a bonnet. I needn't tell you that, though, you old scamp. You've already found it out. Go wait on 'er, Nelson. Don't keep 'er standin' thar."

Pole sat down on a bag of coffee and his friend went to the girl.

"Good-morning, Miss Cynthia," he said, his hat in his hand. Peters seems busy. I don't know much about the stock, but if you'll tell me what you want I'll look for it."

Turning, she stared at him, her big brown eyes under their long lashes wide open as if in surprise.

"Why—why—" She seemed to be making a valiant effort at self-control, and then he noticed that her voice was quivering and that she was quite pale.

## Pole Baker

"I really didn't want to buy anything," she said. "Mother sent me to tell Mr. Peters that she couldn't possibly have the butter ready before to-morrow."

"Oh, the butter," Floyd said, studying her face and manner in perplexity.

"Yes," the girl went on, "she promised to have ten pounds ready to send to Darley, but the calves got to the cows and spoiled everything; that threw her at least a day behind."

"Oh, that don't make a bit o' difference to us, Miss Cynthia!" the clerk cried out from the scales, where he was weighing a parcel of sugar. "Our wagon ain't goin' over till Saturday, nohow."

"Well, she will certainly be glad," the girl returned in a tone of relief, and she moved towards the door. Floyd, still wondering, went with her to the sidewalk.

"You look pale," he said, tentatively, "and—and, well, the truth is, I have never seen you just this way, Cynthia. Have you been having further trouble at home? Is your mother still determined that we sha'n't have any more of our buggy rides?"

"It wasn't that—*to-day*," she said, her eyes raised to his in a glance that, somehow, went straight to his heart. "I'll tell you, Nelson. As I came on, I had just reached Sim Tompkins's field, where he was planting corn and burning stumps, when a negro—one of Captain Duncan's hands—passed on a mule. I didn't hear what he said, but when I came to Sim he had stopped ploughing and was leaning over the fence, saying, 'Awful, horrible,' and so on. I asked him what had happened, and he told me." The girl dropped her eyes, her words hung in her throat, and

## Pole Baker

she put a slender, tapering, though firm and sun-browned, hand to her lips.

"Go on," Floyd urged her. "Tompkins said—"

"He said"—Cynthia swallowed—"that you and Jeff Wade had had words in front of the store and that Wade had shot and *killed you*. I—I—didn't stop to inquire of any one—I thought it was true—and came on here. When I saw you just then absolutely unharmed, I—I—of course it surprised me—or, I mean—"

"How ridiculous!" Floyd laughed mechanically. "There is some mistake, Cynthia. People always get things crooked. That shows how little truth there is in reports. Wade came in here and paid his bill, and did not even speak to me, or I to him."

"But I heard the shots myself, away down the road," said the girl; "and as I got near the store I saw a group of men in front of the door. They were pointing down at the sidewalk, and one of them said, 'Jeff stood right there and fired three times.'"

Floyd laughed again, while her lynx eyes slowly probed his face. He pointed at the court-house door. "Cynthia, do you see that envelope? Wade was shooting at it. I haven't been over to see yet, but they say he put three balls close together in its centre. We ought to incorporate this place into a town, so that a thing of this sort wouldn't be allowed."

"Oh, that was it!" Cynthia exclaimed, in a full breath of relief. "I suppose you think I'm a goose to be so scared at nothing."

His face clouded over, his eyes went down. A

## Pole Baker

customer was going into the store, and he walked on to the street corner with her before replying. Then he said: "I'm glad, though, Cynthia, that you felt badly, as I see you did, when you thought I was done for. Good-bye, I am going to beg you to let me see you again before long, even if your mother *does* object."

As they walked away out of his sight Pole Baker lowered his shaggy head to his brawny hands, his elbows resting on his knees.

"Derned fool!" he exclaimed. "Right now, with his head in the very jaws o' death, he goes on talkin' sweet stuff to women. A purty face, a saft voice, an' a pair o' dreamy eyes would lead that man right into the fire o' hell itself. But that hain't the p'int. Pole Baker, he's yore friend, an' Jeff Wade is a-goin' to kill 'im jest as shore as preachin'."

When Pole left the store he saw nothing of Floyd, but he noticed something else. He was passing Thigpen's bar, and through the open door-way he caught sight of a row of flasks and bottles behind the counter. A seductive, soothing odor greeted him; there was a merry clicking of billiard-balls in the rear, the thunderous thumping of cues on the floor, and joyous laughter. Pole hesitated and then plunged in. At any rate, he told himself, one drink would steady his nerves and show him some way perhaps to rescue his friend from his overhanging peril. Pole took his drink and sat down. Then a friend came in and gave him two or three more.

It was the beginning of another of Pole's prolonged spree.



#### IV



It was Sunday morning a week later. Springtown's principal church stood in the edge of the village on the red-clay road leading up the mountain-side, now in the delicate green dress of spring, touched here and there by fragrant splotches of pink honeysuckle and white, dark-eyed dog-wood blossoms. The building was a diminutive affair, with five shuttered windows on either side, a pulpit at one end, and a door at the other. A single aisle cut the rough benches into two parts, one side being occupied by the men, and the other by the women. The only exception to this rule was the bench reserved, as if by common consent, for Captain Duncan, who always sat with his family, as did any male guests who attended service with them.

The Rev. Jason Hillhouse was the regular pastor. He was under thirty years of age, very tall, slight of build, and of nervous temperament. He wore the conventional black frock-coat, high-cut waistcoat, black necktie, and gray trousers. He was popular. He had applied himself closely to the duties of his calling and was considered a man of character and worth. While not a college graduate, he was yet sufficiently well-read in the Bible and religious literature to suit even the more progressive

## Pole Baker

of mountain church-goers. He differed radically from many of the young preachers who were living imitations of that noted evangelist, the Rev. Tom P. Smith, "the whirlwind preacher," in that he was conservative in the selection of topics for discourse and in his mild delivery.

To-day he was at his best. Few in the congregation suspected it, but, if he distributed his glances evenly over the upturned faces, his thoughts were focussed on only one personality—that of modest Cynthia Porter, who, in a becoming gray gown, sat with her mother on the third bench from the front. Mrs. Porter, a woman of fifty-five years of age, was very plainly attired in a calico dress, to which she had added no ornament of any kind. She wore a gingham poke-bonnet, the hood of which hid her face even from the view of the minister. Her husband, old Nathan Porter, sat directly across the aisle from her. He was one of the roughest-looking men in the house. He had come without his coat, and wore no collar or neck-tie, and for comfort, as the day was warm, he had even thrown off the burden of his suspenders and they lay in careless loops about his hips. He had a broad expanse of baldness, to the edge of which hung a narrow fringe of white hair, and a healthful, pink complexion, and mild, blue eyes.

When the sermon was over and the doxology sung, the preacher stepped down into the congregation to take the numerous hands cordially extended to him. While he was thus engaged old Mayhew came from the "amen corner," on the right, and nodded and smiled patronizingly.

## Pole Baker

"You did pretty well to-day, young man," he said. "I like doctrinal talks. There's no getting around good, sound doctrine, Hillhouse. We'd have less lawlessness if we could keep our people filled plumb-full of sound doctrine. But you don't look like you've been eating enough, my boy. Come home with me and I'll give you a good dinner. I heard a fat hen squeal early this morning, as my cook, old Aunt Nancy, jerked her head off. It looks a pity to take life on a Sunday, but if that hen had been allowed to live she might have broken a commandment by hunting for worms on this day of rest. So the divine intention may be carried out, after all. Come on with me."

"I can't, Brother Mayhew, not to-day, thank you." The young man flushed as his glance struggled on to the Porters, who were waiting near the door. "The fact is, I've already accepted an invitation."

"From somebody with a girl in the family, I'll bet," Mayhew laughed, as he playfully thrust the crooked end of his walking-stick against the preacher's side. "I wish I knew why women are so dead-set on getting a preacher in the family. It may be because they know they will be provided for, after some fashion or other, by the church at large, in case of death or accident."

The preacher laughed as he moved on shaking hands and dispensing cheery words of welcome right and left. Presently the way was clear and he found himself near Cynthia and her mother.

"Sorry to keep you standing here," he said, his color rising higher as he took the hand of the girl and shook it.

## Pole Baker

"Oh, it doesn't matter at all, Brother Hillhouse," the old woman assured him. "I'll go on an' overtake Mr. Porter; you and Cynthia can stroll home by the shadiest way. You needn't walk fast; you'll get hot if you do. Cynthia, I won't need you before dinner. I've got everything ready, with nothing to do but lay back the cloth and push the plates into their places. I want Brother Hillhouse just to taste that pound-cake you made. I'm a good hand at desserts myself, Brother Hillhouse, but she can beat me any day in the week."

"Oh, I know Miss Cynthia can cook," said the minister. "At the picnic at Cohutta Springs last week she took the prize on her fried chicken."

"I told you all that mother fried that chicken," said the girl, indifferently. She had seen Nelson Floyd mounting his fine Kentucky horse among the trees across the street, and had deliberately turned her back towards him.

"Well, I believe I *did* fix the chicken," Mrs. Porter admitted, "but she made the custards and the cake and icing, besides the poor girl was having a lot of trouble with her dress. She washed and did up that muslin twice—the iron spoiled it the first time. I declare I'd have been out of heart, but she was cheerful all through it. There is Nathan now. He never will go home by himself; he is afraid I'll lag behind and he'll get a late dinner."

"How are you to-day, Brother Porter?" Hillhouse asked as they came upon the old man, under the trees, a little way from the church.

"Oh, I'm about as common," was the drawling answer. "You may notice that I limp a little in

## Pole Baker

my left leg. Ever since I had white-swellin' I've had trouble with that self-same leg. I wish you folks would jest stop an' take a peep at it. It looks to me like the blood's quit circulatin' in it. It went to sleep while you was a-talkin' this mornin'—now, I'll swear I didn't mean that as a reflection." He laughed dryly as he paused at a fallen tree and put his foot upon it and started to roll up the leg of his trousers, but his wife drew him on impatiently.

"I wonder what you'll do next!" she said, reprovingly. "This is no time and place for that. What would the Duncans think if they were to drive by while you were doing the like of that on a public road? Come on with me, and let's leave the young folks to themselves."

Grumblingly Porter obeyed. His wife walked briskly and made him keep pace with her, and they were soon several yards ahead of the young couple. Hillhouse was silent for several minutes, and his smooth-shaven face was quite serious in expression.

"I'm afraid I'm going to bore you on that same old line, Miss Cynthia," he said, presently. "Really, I can't well help it. This morning I fancied you listened attentively to what I was saying."

"Oh, yes, I always do that," the girl returned, with an almost perceptible shudder of her shoulders.

"It helped me wonderfully, Miss Cynthia, and once a hope actually flashed through me so strong that I lost my place. You may have seen me turning the pages of the Bible. I was trying to think where I'd left off. The hope was this: that some day if I keep on begging you, and showing my deep respect and regard, you will not turn me away.

## Pole Baker

Just for one minute this morning it seemed to me that you had actually consented, and—and the thought was too much for me."

"Oh, don't say any more about it, Mr. Hillhouse," Cynthia pleaded, giving him a full look from her wonderful brown eyes. "I have already said as much as I can on that subject."

"But I've known many of the happiest marriages to finally result from nothing but the sheer persistence of the man concerned," the preacher went on, ardently, "and when I think of *that I live*, Miss Cynthia—I live! And when I think of the chance of losing you it nearly drives me crazy. I can't help feeling that way. You are simply all I care for on earth. Do you remember when I first met you? It was at Hattie Mayfield's party just after I got this appointment; we sat on the porch alone and talked. I reckon it was merely your respect for my calling that made you so attentive, but I went home that night out of my head with admiration. Then I saw that Frank Miller was going with you everywhere, and that people thought you were engaged, and, as I did not admire his moral character, I was very miserable in secret. Then I saw that he stopped, and I got it from a reliable source that you had turned him down because you didn't want to marry such a man, and my hopes and admiration climbed still higher. You had proved that you were the kind of woman for a preacher's wife—the kind of woman I've always dreamed of having as my companion in life."

"I didn't love him, that was all," Cynthia said, quietly. "It would not have been fair to him

## Pole Baker

or myself to have received his constant attentions."

"But now I am down in the dregs again, Miss Cynthia." Hillhouse gave a sigh. It was almost a groan.

She glanced at him once, and then lowered her eyes half fearfully to the ground. And, getting his breath rapidly, the preacher bent more closely over her shoulder, as if to catch some reply from her lips. She made none.

"Yes, I'm in the dregs again—miserable, afraid, jealous! You know why, Miss Cynthia. You know that any lover would be concerned to see the girl upon whom he had based his every hope going often with Nelson Floyd, a man about whom people say—"

"Stop!" the girl turned upon him suddenly and gazed into his eyes steadily. "If you have anything to say against him, don't do it to me. He's my friend, and I will not listen to anything against those I like."

"I'm not going to criticise him." Hillhouse bit his white, unsteady lip, as he pinched it between his thumb and index finger. "A man's a fool that will try to win a woman by running down his rival. The way to run a man up in a woman's eye is to openly run him down. Men are strong enough to bear such things, but women don't think so. They shelter them like they do their babies. No, I wasn't going to run him down, but I am afraid of him. When you go out driving with him, I—"

Again Cynthia turned upon him and looked at him steadily, her eyes flashing. "Don't go too far; you

## Pole Baker

might regret it," she said. "It is an insult to be spoken to as you are speaking to me."

"Oh, don't, don't! You misunderstand me," protested the bewildered lover. "I—I am not afraid of—you understand, of course, I'm not afraid you will not be able to—to take care of yourself, but he has so many qualities that win and attract women that—Oh, I'm jealous, Miss Cynthia, that's the whole thing in a nutshell. He has the reputation of being a great favorite with all women, and now that he seems to admire you more than any of the rest—"

The girl raised her eyes from the ground; a touch of color rose to her cheeks. "He doesn't admire me more than the others," she said, tentatively. "You are mistaken, Mr. Hillhouse."

He failed to note her rising color, the subtle eagerness oozing from her compact self-control.

"No, I'm not blind," he went on, blindly building up his rival's cause. "He admires you extravagantly—he couldn't help it. You are beautiful, you have vivacity, womanly strength, and a thousand other qualities that are rare in this out-of-the-way place. Right here I want to tell you something. I know you will laugh, for you don't seem to care for such things, but you know Colonel Price is quite an expert on genealogical matters. He's made a great study of it, and his chief hobby is that many of these sturdy mountain people are the direct descendants of fine old English families from younger sons, you know, who settled first in Virginia and North Carolina, and then drifted into this part of Georgia. He didn't know of my admiration for you, but one day, at the meeting of the Confederate



## Pole Baker

Veterans at Springtown, he saw you on the platform with the other ladies, and he said: 'I'll tell you, Hillhouse, right there is a living proof of what I have always argued. That daughter of Nathan Porter has a face that is as patrician as any woman of English royal birth. I understand,' the colonel went on to say, 'that her mother was a Radcliffe, which is one of the best and most historic of the Virginia families, and Porter, as rough as he is, comes from good old English stock.' Do you wonder, Cynthia, that I agree with him? There really is good blood in you. Your grandmother is one of the most refined and gentle old ladies I have ever met anywhere, and I have been about a good deal."

"I am not sure that Colonel Price is right," the girl responded. "I've heard something of that kind before. I think Colonel Price had an article in one of the Atlanta papers about it, with a list of old family names. My father knows little or nothing about his ancestry, but my grandmother has always said her forefathers were wealthy people. She remembers her grandmother as being a fine old lady who, poor as she was, tried to make her and the other children wear their bonnets and gloves in the sun to keep their complexions white. But I don't like to discuss that sort of thing, Mr. Hillhouse. It won't do in America. I think we are what we make *ourselves*, not what others have made of *themselves*. One is individuality, the other open imitation."

The young man laughed. "That's all very fine," he said. "When it was your forefathers who made it possible for you to have the mental capacity for

## Pole Baker

the very opinion you have just expressed. At any rate, there is a little comfort in your view, for if you were to pride yourself on Price's theories, as many a woman would, you might look higher than a poor preacher with such an untraceable name as mine. And you know, ordinary as it is, you have simply got to wear it sooner or later."

"You must not mention that again," Cynthia said, firmly. "I tell you, I am not good enough for a minister's wife. There is a streak of worldliness in me that I shall never overcome."

"That cuts me like a knife," said Hillhouse. "It hurts because it reminds me of something I once heard Pole Baker say in a group at the post-office. He said that women simply do not like what is known as a 'goody-goody' man. Sometimes as coarse a fellow as Pole hits the nail of truth on the head while a better-educated man would miss and mash his thumb. But if I am in the pulpit, I'm only human. It seemed to me the other day when I saw you and Nelson Floyd driving alone up the mountain that the very fires of hell itself raged inside of me. I always hold family prayer at home for the benefit of my mother and sister, but that night I cut it out, and lay on the bed rolling and tossing like a crazy man. He's handsome, Miss Cynthia, and he has a soft voice and a way of making all women sympathize with him—why they do it, I don't know. It's true he's had a most miserable childhood, but he is making money hand over hand now, and has everything in his favor."

"He's not a happy man, Mr. Hillhouse; any one who knows him can see that."

## Pole Baker

"Oh, I suppose he broods over the mystery that hangs over his origin," said the preacher. "That's only natural for an ambitious man. I once knew a fellow who was a foundling, and he told me he never intended to get married on that account. He was morbidly sensitive about it, but it is different with Floyd. He *does* know his name, at least, and he will, no doubt, discover his relatives some day. But it hurts me to see you with him so much."

"Why, he goes with other girls," Cynthia said, her lips set together tightly, her face averted.

"And perhaps you know, Miss Cynthia, that people talk about some of the girls he has been with."

"I know that," said the girl, looking at him with an absent glance. "There is no use going over it. I hear nothing all day long at home except that—that—that! Oh, sometimes I wish I were dead!"

"Ah, that hurts worse than anything I have heard you say," declared the minister, stroking his thin face with an unsteady hand. "Why should a beautiful, pure, human flower like you be made unhappy because of contact with a—"

"Stop, I tell you, stop!" the girl stared at him with flashing eyes. "I am not going to have you talk to me as if I were a child. I know him as well as you do. You constantly preach that a person ought to be forgiven of his sins, and yet you want to load some people down with theirs—that is, when it suits you. He has as good a right to—to—to reform as any one, and I myself have heard you say that the vilest sin often purifies and lifts one up. Don't get warped all to one side, Mr. Hillhouse. I

## Pole Baker

shall not respect your views any more if you do."

The minister was white in the face and trembling helplessly.

"You are tying me hand and foot," he said, with a sigh. "If I ever had a chance to gain my desires I am killing them, but God knows I can't help it. I am fighting for my life."

"And behind another's back," added the girl, bravely. "You've got to be fair to him. As for myself, I don't believe half the things that the busy-bodies have said about him. Let me tell you something." They had come to a little brook which they had to cross on brown, almost submerged stepping-stones, and she paused, turned to him and laid her small hand on his arm, and said, portentously: "Nelson Floyd has been alone with me several times, and has never yet told me that he loved me."

"I'm not going to say what is in my mind," Hillhouse said, with a cold, significant, even triumphant sneer on his white lip, as he took her hand and helped her across the stream.

"You say you won't?" Cynthia gave him her eyes, almost pleadingly.

"That is, not unless you will let me be plain with you," Hillhouse answered, "as plain as I'd be to my sister."

They walked on side by side in silence, now very near her father's house.

"You may as well finish what you were going to say," the girl gave in, with a sigh of resignation not untinged with a curiosity which had devoured her precaution.

## Pole Baker

"Well, I was going to say that, if what I have gathered here and there is true, it is Nelson Floyd's favorite method to *look*, do you understand?—to *look*, not talk love to the girls he goes with. He has never, it seems, committed himself by a scratch of a pen or by word of mouth, and yet every silly woman he has paid attention to (before he began to go with you) has secretly sworn to herself that she was the world and all to him."

Cynthia's face became grave. Her glance went down, and for a moment she seemed incapable of speech. Finally, however, her color rose, and she laughed defiantly.

"Well, here is a girl, Mr. Hillhouse, who will not be fooled that way, you may rely on that. So don't worry about me. I'll take care of myself."

"I've no doubt you will," said the preacher, gloomily.

"Yes, you'll see that I can," Cynthia declared, with animation. "There's mother on the porch. Good gracious! do change the subject. If she sets in on it, I'll not come to the table. Like you, she believes all she has heard against him. She likes you and hates the ground he walks on."

"Perhaps that, too, will be my damnation," Hillhouse retorted. "I know something about human nature. I may see the day that I'd be glad of a doubtful reputation."

He caught her reproachful glance at this remark as he opened the gate for her and followed her in. Porter sat on the porch in the shade reading a newspaper, and his wife stood in the door-way.

"Run in and take off your things, Cynthia," Mrs.

## Pole Baker

Porter said, with a welcoming smile. "Brother Hillhouse can sit with your pa till we call dinner. I want you to help me a little bit. Your grandmother is lying down, and doesn't feel well enough to come to the table."

When the women had gone in, and the preacher had seated himself in a rough, hide-bottomed chair near his host, Porter, with a chuckle, reached down to the floor and picked up a short, smooth stick, to the end of which was attached a piece of leather about three inches wide and four inches long.

"That's an invention o' mine," Porter explained, proudly, as he tapped his knee with the leather. "Brother Hillhouse, ef you was to offer me a new five-dollar note fer this thing, an' I couldn't git me another, I'd refuse p'int blank."

"You don't say," said Hillhouse, concentrating his attention to the article by strong effort; "what is it for?"

"I don't know any other name fer it than a 'fly-flap,'" said Porter. "I set here one day tryin' to read, an' the flies made sech a dead-set at my bald head that it mighty nigh driv' me crazy. I kept fightin' 'em with my paper an' knockin' my specks off an' losin' my place at sech a rate that I got to studyin' how to git out of the difficulty, fer thar was a long fly-spell ahead of us. Well, I invented this thing, an' I give you my word it's as good fun as goin' a-fishin'. I kin take it in my hand—this away—an' hold the paper, too, an' the minute one o' the devilish things lights on my scalp, I kin give a twist o' the wrist an' that fly's done fer. You see the leather is too flat an' saft to hurt *me*, an' I never

## Pole Baker

seed a fly yit that was nimble enough to git out from under it. But my fun is mighty nigh over," Porter went on. "Flies has got sense; they profit by experience the same as folks does; at any rate, they seem to know thar's a dead-fall set on my bald-spot, an' they've quit tryin' to lay the'r eggs in the root-holes o' my hair. Only now and then a new-comer is foolhardy and inclined to experiment. The old customers are as scared o' my head as they are of a spider-web."

"It certainly is a rare device," said Hillhouse. "I don't know that I ever heard of one before."

"I reckon not," the farmer returned, placidly. "Somebody always has to lead out in matters of improvement. My wife an' daughter was dead-set agin me usin' it at fust. They never looked into the workin' of it close, an' thought I mashed my prey on my head, but thar never was a bigger mistake. The flap don't even puncture the skin, as tender as the'r hides are. I know it don't, beca'se they always fall flat o' the'r backs an' kick awhile before givin' up. I invented another thing that I value mighty nigh as high as I do this. I never have seed another one o' them in use, nuther. It's in my room in the bureau-drawer. It's a back-scratcher. It's got a long, white-oak handle, like this, an' a little, rake-shaped trick with hickory teeth at the end. Well, sir, you may not believe it, but I kin shove that thing down under my shirt an' hit a ticklin' spot before you kin bat yore eye, while I used to rub the bark off'n the trees, all about, in my effort to git bodily relief. You may 'a' seed me leave meetin' right in the middle o' some o' yore


## Pole Baker

talks. Well, that's beca'se my wife an' Cynthia won't let me take it to church with me. They'd a thousand times ruther I'd go outside an' rub agin a tree like a razor-back shote than have me do a thing that the Prices an' Duncans hain't accustomed to. Sech folks are agin progress."

Hillhouse laughed obligingly, his mind on what Cynthia had said to him, and then Mrs. Porter came to the door and announced that dinner was served.



## V

 POLE BAKER decided to give the young people of the neighborhood a "corn-shucking." He had about fifty bushels of the grain which he said had been mellowing and sweetening in the husk all the winter, and, as the market-price had advanced from sixty to seventy-five cents, he decided to sell.

Pole's corn-shuckings were most enjoyable festivities. Mrs. Baker usually had some good refreshments and the young people came for miles around. The only drawback about the affairs was that Pole seldom had much corn to husk, and the fun was over too soon. The evening chosen for the present gathering was favored with clear moonlight and delightfully balmy weather, and when Nelson Floyd walked over after working an hour on his books at the store, he found a merry group in Pole's front-yard.

"Yo're jest in time," Pole called out to him, as he threw the frail gate open for the guest to pass through. "I was afeared thar was a few more petticoats than pants to string around my pile o' corn, an' you'll help even up. Come on, all of you, let's mosey on down to the barn. Sally," he called out to his wife, a sweet-faced woman on the porch, "put them childern to sleep an' come on."

## Pole Baker

With merry laughter the young men and girls made a rush in the direction of the barn. Nelson Floyd, with a sudden throbbing of the heart, had noticed Cynthia Porter in the group, and as he and Baker fell in behind he asked: "Who came with Cynthia Porter, Pole?"

"Nobody," said Baker. "She come over jest 'fore dark by the short-cut through the meadow. I'll bet a hoss you are thinkin' o' galavantin' 'er back home."

"That's what I came for," said Floyd, with a smile.

"Well, I'm sorry, fer this once," said Pole; "but I cayn't alter my plans fer friend or foe. I don't have but one shuckin' a year, an' on that occasion I'm a-goin' to be plumb fair to all that accept my invite. You may git what you want, but you'll have to stand yore chance with the balance. I'll announce my rules in a minute, an' then you'll understand what I mean."

They had now reached the great cone of corn heaped up at the door of the barn, and the merry-makers were dancing around it in the moonlight, clapping their hands and singing.

"Halt one minute!" Pole called out peremptorily, and there was silence. "Now," he continued, "all of you set down on the straw an' listen to my new rules. I've been studyin' these out ever since my last shuckin', an' these will beat all. Now listen! Time is a great improver, an' we all don't have to shuck corn jest like our granddaddies did. I want to make this thing interest you, fer that pile o' corn has to be shucked an' throwed into the barn 'fore you leave yore places."

## Pole Baker

"Well, I wouldn't preach a sermon fust," laughed Mrs. Baker, as she appeared suddenly. "Boys an' gals that git together fer a good time don't want to listen to an old married man talk."

"But one married man likes to listen to *that woman* talk, folks," Pole broke in, "fer her voice makes sweet music to his ear. That's a fact, gentlemen an' ladies; here's one individual that could set an' listen to that sweet woman's patient voice from dark to sun-up, an' then pray fer more dark, an' more talk. I hain't the right sort of a man to yoke to, but she is the right sort of a woman. They hain't all that way, though, boys, an' I'd advise you that are worthy of a good helpmate to think an' look before you plunge into matrimony. Matrimony is like a sheet of ice, which, until you bust it, may cover pure, runnin' water or a stagnant mud-hole. Before marriage a woman will say yes an' no, as meek as that entire bunch of females. Sugar wouldn't melt in 'er mouth, but when she hooks her fish she'll do her best to make a sucker out'n it ef it's a brook trout at the start. I mean a certain *kind* of a woman, now; but thank the Lord, He made the other sort, too, an' the other sort, boys, is what you ort to look fer. I heard a desperate old bach say once that he believed he'd stand a better chance o' gittin' a good female nature under a homely exterior than under a pretty one, an' he was on the rampage fer a snaggle tooth; but I don't know. A nature that's made jest by a face won't endure one way or another long. Thar's my little neighbor over thar, ef she don't combine both a purty face an' a sweet, patient nature I'm no judge."

## Pole Baker

"Hush, Pole, Cynthia don't want you to single her out in public that away," protested Mrs. Baker.

"He's simply bent on flattering more work out of me," responded Cynthia, quite adroitly, Floyd thought, as he noted her blushes in the moonlight. "We are waiting for your rules, Mr. Baker."

"Yes," spoke up Floyd, "give us the rules, and let us go to work, and then you can talk all you want to."

"All right, here goes. Well, you are all settin' about the same distance from the pile, an' you've got an equal chance. Now, the fust man or woman who finds a red ear of corn must choose a partner to work with, an', furthermore, it shall be the duty o' the man to escort the girl home, an' in addition to that the winnin' man shall be entitled to kiss any girl in the crowd, an' she hereby pledges herself to submit graceful. It's a bang-up good rule, fer them that want to be kissed kin take a peep at the ear 'fore it's shucked, an' throw it to any man they like, an' them that don't kin hope fer escape by blind luck from sech an awful fate."

"I think, myself, that it would be an awful fate to be kissed by a man you didn't care for," laughed Mrs. Baker. "Pole has made his rules to suit the men better than the women."

"The second rule is this," added Pole, with a smile, "an' that is, that whoever finds a red ear, man or woman, I git to kiss my wife."

"Good, that's all right!" exclaimed Floyd, and everybody laughed as they set to work. Pole sat down near Floyd, and filled and lighted his pipe. "I used to think everything was fair in a game

## Pole Baker

whar gals was concerned," he said in an undertone. "I went to a shuckin' once whar they had these rules an' I got on to exactly what I see you are on to."

"Me? What do you mean?" asked Floyd.

"Why, you sly old dog, you are not shuckin' more than one ear in every three you pick up. You are lookin' to see ef the silk is dark. You have found out that a red ear always has dark silk."

Floyd laughed. "Don't give me away, Pole. I learned that when old man Scott used to send me out on a frosty morning to feed the cattle."

"Well, I won't say nothin'," Pole promised. "Ef money was at stake, it 'ud be different, but they say all's fair whar wine an' women is concerned. Besides, the sharper a man is the better he'll provide fer the wife he gits, an' a man ought to be allowed to profit by his own experience. You go ahead; ef you root a red ear out o' that pile, old hog, I'll count you in." Pole rose and went round the other side of the stack. There was a soft rustling sound as the husks were torn away and swept in rising billows behind the workers, and the steady thumping of the ears as they fell inside the barn.

It was not a fair game he was playing, and yet Nelson Floyd cared little for that. Even as it was, it was growing monotonous. He had come there to see Cynthia, and Pole's new rule was not what he had counted on. There was a lull in the merriment and general rustle, and Floyd heard Hattie Mayhew say in a clear tone: "I know why Cynthia is so quiet. It's because there wasn't somebody here to open with prayer."

Floyd was watching Cynthia's face, and he saw it

## Pole Baker

cloud over for a moment. She made some forced reply which he could not hear. It was Kitty Welborn's voice that came to him on her merry laugh.

"Oh, yes, Cynthia has us all beaten badly!" said that little blonde. "We worked our fingers to the bones fixing up his room. Cynthia didn't lay her hand to it, and yet he never looks at any one else while he is preaching, and as soon as the sermon is over he rushes for her. They say Mr. Porter thinks Mr. Hillhouse is watching him, and has quit going to sleep."

"That's a fact," said Fred Denslow, as he aimed a naked ear of corn at the barn-door and threw it. "The boys say Hillhouse will even let 'em cuss before him, just so they will listen to what he says about Miss Cynthia."

"That isn't fair to Miss Cynthia," Nelson Floyd observed, suddenly. "I'm afraid you are making it pretty hot for her on that side, so I'm going to invite her over here. You see I have found the first red ear of corn, and it's big enough to count double."

There was a general shout and clapping of hands as Floyd held it up to view in the moonlight. He put it into the pocket of his coat, as he rose and moved round towards Cynthia. Bending down to her, he said: "Come on, you've got to obey the rules of the game, you know."

She allowed him to draw her to her feet.

"Now fer the fust act?" Pole Baker cried out. "I hain't a-goin' to have no bashful corn-shuckers. Ef you balk or kick over a trace, I'll leave you out next time, shore."

## Pole Baker


"You didn't make a thoroughly fair rule, Pole," said Floyd. "The days of woman slavery are past. I shall not take advantage of the situation, for I know Miss Cynthia is praying for mercy right now."

Everybody laughed as Floyd led the girl round to his place and raked up a pile of shucks for her to sit on.

"Well, there ought to have been another rule," laughed Fred Denslow," an' to the effect that if the winning man, through sickness, lack of backbone, or sudden death, was prevented from takin' the prize, somebody else ought to have had a chance. Here I've been workin' like a corn-field negro to win, and now see the feller Heaven has smiled on throwin' that sort of a flower away. Good gracious, what's the world comin' to?"

"Well, I'll have *mine*, anyway," Pole Baker was heard to say, and he took his little wife in his arms and kissed her tenderly.

## VI

EFRESHMENTS had been served, the last ear of corn husked and thrown into the barn, and they had all risen to depart, when Hillhouse hurried down the path from the cottage. He was panting audibly, and had evidently been walking fast. He shook hands perfunctorily with Pole and his wife, and then turned to Cynthia.

"I'm just from your house," he said, "and I promised your mother to come over after you. I was afraid I'd be late. The distance round by the road is longer than I thought."

"I'm afraid you *are* too late," said Floyd, with a polite smile. "I was lucky enough to find the first red ear of corn, and the reward was that I might take home any one I asked. I assure you I'll see that Miss Cynthia is well taken care of."

"Oh! I—I see." The preacher seemed stunned by the disappointment. "I didn't know; I thought—"

"Yes, Floyd has won fast enough," said Pole. "An' he's acted the part of the gentleman all through." Pole explained what Floyd had done in excusing Miss Cynthia from the principal forfeit he had won.

But Hillhouse seemed unable to reply. The young people were moving towards the cottage, and



## Pole Baker

he fell behind Floyd and his partner, walking along with the others and saying nothing.

It was a lonely, shaded road which Floyd and his companion traversed to reach her home.

"My luck turned just in the nick of time," he said, exultantly. "I went there, Cynthia, especially to talk with you, and I was mad enough to fight when I saw how Pole had arranged everything. Then, by good-fortune and cheating, I found that red ear; and, well, here we are. You have no idea how pretty you look, with your hair—"

"Stop, don't begin that!" Cynthia suddenly commanded, and she turned her eyes upon him steadily.

"Stop? Why do you say that?"

"Because you talk that way to all the girls, and I don't want to hear it."

Floyd laughed. "I declare you are a strange little creature. You simply won't let me be nice to you."

"Well, I'm sure I don't like you when you speak that way," the girl said, seriously. "It sounds insincere—it makes me doubt you more than anything else."

"Then some things about me *don't* make you doubt me," he said, with tentative eagerness.

She was silent for a moment, then she nodded her head. "I'll admit that some things I hear of you make me rather admire you, in a way."

"Please tell me what they are," he said, with a laugh.

"I've heard, for one thing, of your being very good and kind to poor people—people who Mr.

## Pole Baker

Mayhew would have turned out of their homes for debt if you hadn't interfered."

"Oh, that was only business, Cynthia," Floyd laughed. "I simply can see farther than the old man can—that's all. He thought those customers never would be able to pay, but I knew they would some day, and, moreover, that they would come up with the back interest."

"I don't believe it," the girl said, firmly. "Those things make me rather like you, while the others make—they make me—doubt."

"Doubt? Oh, you odd little woman!" They had reached a spring which flowed from a great bed of rocks in the side of a rugged hill. He pointed to a flat stone quite near it. "Do you remember, Cynthia, the first time I ever had a talk with you? It was while we were seated on this very rock."

She recalled it, but only nodded her head.

"It was a year ago," he pursued. "You had on a pink dress and wore your hair like a little girl in a plait down your back. Cynthia, you were the prettiest creature I had ever seen. I could hardly talk to you for wondering over your dazzling beauty. You are even more beautiful now; you have ripened; you are the most graceful woman I ever saw, and your mouth!—Cynthia, I'll swear you have the most maddening mouth God ever made out of flesh, blood and—soul!" He caught her hand impulsively and sat down on the stone, drawing her steadily towards him.

She hesitated, looking back towards Baker's cottage.

"Sit down, little girl," he entreated, "I'm tired.

## Pole Baker

I've worked hard all day at the store, and that corn-shucking wasn't the best thing to taper off on." She hesitated an instant longer, and then allowed him to draw her down beside him. "There, now," he said. "That is more like it." He still held her hand; it lay warm, pulsating and helpless in his strong, feverish grasp.

"Do you know why I did not kiss you back there?" he asked, suddenly.

"I don't know why you didn't, but it was good of you," she answered.

"No, it wasn't," he laughed. "I won't take credit for what I don't deserve. I simply put it off, Cynthia—put it off. I knew we would be alone on our way home, and that you would not refuse me."

"But I shall!" she said, with a start. "I'm not going to let you kiss me here in—in this way."

"Then you'll not pay the forfeit you owe," he said, fondling her hand. "I've always considered you fair in everything, and, Cynthia, you don't know how much I want to kiss you. No, you won't refuse me—you can't." His left arm was behind her, and it encircled her waist. She made an effort to draw herself erect, but he drew her closer to him. Her head sank upon his shoulder and lay there while he pressed his lips to hers."

Then she sat up, and firmly pushed his arm down from her waist.

"I'm sorry I let you do it," she said, under her breath.

"But why, darling?"

"Because I've said a thousand times that I

## Pole Baker

would not, but I have—I *have*, and I shall hate myself always."

"When you have made me the happiest fellow in the state?" Floyd said, passionately. "Don't go," he urged, for she had risen and drawn her hand from his and turned towards her home. He rose and stood beside her, suiting his step to hers.

"Do you remember the night we sat and talked in the grape-arbor behind your house?" he asked. "Well, you never knew it, but I've been there three nights within the last month, hoping that I'd get to see you by some chance or other." I always work late on my accounts, and when I am through, and the weather is fine, I walk to your house, climb over the fence, slip through the orchard, and sit in that arbor, trying to imagine you are there with me. I often see a light in your room, and the last time I became so desperate that I actually whistled for you. This way—" He put his thumb and little finger between his lips and made an imitation of a whippoorwill's call. "You see, no one could tell that from the real thing. If you ever hear that sound again in the direction of the grape-arbor you'll know I need you, little girl, and you must not disappoint me."

"I'd never respond to it," Cynthia said, firmly. "The idea of such a thing!"

"But you know I can't go to your house often with your mother opposing my visits as she does, and when I'm there she never leaves us alone. No, I must have you to myself once in a while, little woman, and you must help me. Remember, if I call you, I'll want you badly." He whistled again,

## Pole Baker

and the echo came back on the still air from a nearby hill-side. They were passing a log-cabin which stood a few yards from the road-side.

"Budd Crow moved there to-day," Cynthia said, as if desirous of changing the subject. "He rented twenty acres from my father. The 'White Caps' whipped him a week ago, for being lazy and not working for his family. His wife came over and told me all about it. She said it really had brought him to his senses, but that it had broken her heart. She cried while she was talking to me. Why does God afflict some women with men of that kind, and make others the wives of governors and presidents?"

"Ah, there you are beyond my philosophic depth, Cynthia. You mustn't bother your pretty head about those things. I sometimes rail against my fate for giving me the ambition of a king while I do not even know who—but I think you know what I mean?"

"Yes, I think I do," said the girl, sympathetically, "and some day I believe all that will be cleared up. Some coarse natures wouldn't care a straw about it, but you *do* care, and it is the things we want and can't get that count."

"It is strange," he said, thoughtfully, "but of late I always think of my mother as having been young and beautiful. I think of her, too, as a well-bred, educated woman with well-to-do relatives. I think all those things without any proof even as to what her maiden name was or where she came from. Are you still unhappy at home, Cynthia?"

"Nearly all the time," the girl sighed. "As she grows older my mother gets more fault-finding and

## Pole Baker

suspicious than ever. Then she has set her mind on my marrying Mr. Hillhouse. They seem to be working together to that end, and it is very tiresome to me."

"Well, I'm glad you don't love him," Floyd said. "I don't think he could make any one of your nature happy."

The girl stared into his eyes. They had reached the gate of the farm-house and he opened it for her. "Now, good-night," he said, pressing her hand. "Remember, if you ever hear a lonely whippoorwill calling, that he is longing for companionship."

She leaned over the gate, drawing it towards her till the iron latch clicked in its catch. With a shudder she recalled the hot kiss he had pressed upon her lips, and wondered what he might later think about it.

"I'll never meet you there at night," she said, firmly. "My mother doesn't treat me right, but I shall not act that way when she is asleep. You may come to see me here now and then, but it will go no further than that."

"Well, I shall sit alone in the arbor," he returned with a low laugh, "and I hope your hard heart will keep you awake. I wouldn't treat a hound-dog that way, little girl."

"Well, I shall treat a strong man that way," she said, and she went into the house.

She opened the front-door, which was never locked, and went into her room on the right of the little hall. The night was very still, and down the road she heard Floyd's whippoorwill call growing fainter and fainter as he strode away. She found a match

## Pole Baker

and lighted the lamp on her bureau and looked at her reflection in the little oval-shaped mirror. Remembering his embrace, she shuddered and wiped her lips with her hand.

"He'll despise me," she muttered. "He'll think I am weak, like those other girls, but I am not. *I am not*. I'll show him that he can't, and yet"—her head sank to her hands, which were folded on the top of the bureau—"I couldn't help it. My God! I couldn't help it. I must have actually wanted him to—no, I didn't. I didn't; he held me. I had no idea his arm was behind me till he—"

There was a soft step in the hall. The door of her room creaked like the low scream of a cat. A gaunt figure in white stood on the threshold. It was Mrs. Porter in her night-dress, her feet bare, her iron-gray hair hanging loose upon her shoulders.

"I couldn't go to sleep, Cynthia," she said, "till I knew you were safe at home."

"Well, I'm here all right, mother, so go back to bed and don't catch your death of cold."

The old woman moved across the room to Cynthia's bed and sat down on it. "I heard you coming down the road and went to the front window. I had sent Brother Hillhouse for you, but it was Nelson Floyd who brought you home. Didn't Brother Hillhouse get there before you left?"

"Yes, but I had already promised Mr. Floyd."

The old woman met her daughter's glance steadily. "I suppose all I'll do or say won't do a bit o' good. Cynthia, you know what I'm afraid of."

The girl stood straight, her face set and firm, her great, dreamy eyes flashing.

## Pole Baker

"Yes, and that's the insult of it. Mother, you almost make me think you are judging my nature by your own, when you were at my age. I tell you you will drive me too far. A girl at a certain time of her life wants a mother's love and sympathy; she doesn't want threats, fears, and disgraceful suspicions."

Mrs. Porter covered her face with her bony hands and groaned aloud.

"You are confessing," she said, "that you are tied an' bound to him by the heart and that there isn't anything left for you but the crumbs he lets fall from his profligate table. You confess that you are lyin' at his feet, greedily lappin' up what he deigns to drop to you and the rest of those—"

"Stop!" Cynthia sprang to her mother and laid her small hand heavily on the thin shoulder. "Stop, you know you are telling a deliberate—" She paused, turned, and went slowly back to the bureau. "God forgive me! God help me remember my duty to her as my mother. She's old; she's out of her head."

"There, you said something then!" The old woman had drawn herself erect and sat staring at her daughter, her hands on her sharp knees. "That reminds me of something else. You know my sister Martha got to worryin' when she was along about my age over her law-suit matters, and kept it up till her brain gave way. Folks always said she and I were alike. Dr. Strong has told me time after time to guard against worry or I'd go out and kill myself as she did. I haven't mentioned this before, but I do now. I can't keep down my



## Pole Baker

fears and suspicions, while the very air is full of that man's conduct. He's a devil, I tell you—a devil in human shape. Your pretty face has caught his fancy, and your holding him off, so far, has made him determined to crush you like a plucked flower. Why don't he go to the Duncans and the Prices and lay his plans? Because those men shoot at the drop of a hat. He knows your pa is not of that stamp and that you haven't any men kin to defend our family honor. He hasn't any of his own; nobody knows who or what he is. My opinion is that he's a nobody and knows it, and out of pure spite is trying to pull everybody else down to his level."

"Mother—" Cynthia's tone had softened. Her face was filling with sudden pity for the quivering creature on the bed. "Mother, will you not have faith in me? If I promise you honestly to take care of myself, and make him understand what and who I am, won't that satisfy you? Even men with bad reputations have a good side to their natures, and they often reach a point at which they reform. A man like that interests a woman. I don't dispute that, but there are strong women and weak women. Mother, I'm not a weak woman; as God is my judge, I'm able to take care of myself. It pains me to say this, for you ought to know it; you ought to *feel* it. You ought to see it in my eye and hear it in my voice. Now go to bed, and sleep. I'm really afraid you may lose your mind since you told me about Aunt Martha."

The face of the old woman changed. It lighted up with sudden hope.

"Somehow, I believe what you say," she said,

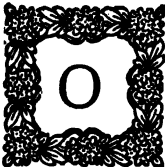
## Pole Baker

with a faint smile. "Anyway, I'll try not to worry any more." She rose and went to the door. "Yes, I'll try not to worry any more," she repeated. "It may all come out right."

When she found herself alone Cynthia turned and looked at her reflection in the glass.

"He didn't once tell me plainly that he loved me," she said. "He has never used that word. He has never said that he meant or wanted to mar—" She broke off, staring into the depths of her own great, troubled eyes—"and yet I let him hold me in his arms and kiss me—*me!*" A hot flush filled her neck and face and spread to the roots of her hair. Then suddenly she blew out the light and crept to her bed.

## VII

 ON the following Saturday morning there was, as usual, a considerable gathering of farmers at Springtown. A heavy fall of rain during the night had rendered the soil unfit for ploughing, and it was a sort of enforced holiday. Many of them stood around Mayhew & Floyd's store. Several women and children were seated between the two long counters, on boxes and the few available chairs. Nelson Floyd was at the high desk in the rear, occupied with business letters, when Pole Baker came in at the back-door and stood near the writer, furtively scanning the long room.

"Where's the old man?" he asked, when Floyd looked up and saw him.

"Not down yet. Dry up, Pole; I was making a calculation, and you knocked it hell west and crooked."

"Well, I reckon that kin wait. I've got a note fer you." Pole was taking it from his coat-pocket.

"Miss Cynthia?" Floyd asked, eagerly.

"Not by a long shot," said Pole. "I reckon maybe you'll wish it was." He threw the missive on the desk, and went on in quite a portentous tone. "I come by Jeff Wade's house, Nelson, on my way back from the mill. He was inside with his wife

## Pole Baker

and childern, an' as I was passin' one of the little boys run out to the fence and called me in to whar he was. He's a devil of a fellow! He's expectin' his wife to be confined, an' I saw he was tryin' to keep her in the dark. What you reckon he said?"

"How do I know?" The young merchant, with a serious expression of face, had torn open the envelope, but had not yet unfolded the sheet of cheap, blue-lined writing-paper.

"Why, he jest set thar in his chair before the fire, an' as he handed the note up to me he sorter looked knowin' an' said, said he: 'Pole, I'm owin' Mayhew & Floyd a little balance on my account, an' they seem uneasy. I wish you'd take this letter to young Floyd. He's always stood to me, sorter, an' I believe he'll git old Mayhew to wait on me a little while.'"

"Did he say that, Pole?" Floyd had opened the note, but was looking straight into Baker's eyes.

"Yes, he said them very words, Nelson, although he knowed I was on hand that day when he paid off his bill in full. I couldn't chip in thar before his wife, an' the Lord knows I couldn't tell him I had an idea what was in the note, so I rid on as fast as I could. I had a turn o' meal under me, an' I tuck it off an' hid it in the thicket t'other side o' Duncan's big spring. I wasn't goin' to carry a secret war-message a-straddle o' two bushels o' meal warm from the mill-rocks. An' I'd bet my hat that sheet o' paper hain't no flag o' truce."

Floyd read the note. There was scarcely a change in the expression of his face or a flicker of his eye-

## Pole Baker

lashes as he folded it with steady fingers and held it in his hand.

"Yes, he says he has got the whole story, Pole," Floyd said. "He gives me fair warning as a man of honor to arm myself. He will be here at twelve o'clock to the minute."

"Great God!" Pole ejaculated. "You hain't one chance in a million to escape with yore life. You seed how he shot t'other day. He was excited then—he was as ca'm as a rock mountain when I seed him awhile ago, an' his ride to town will steady 'im more. He sorter drawed down his mouth at one corner an' cocked up his eye, same as to say, 'You understand; thar hain't no use in upsettin' women folks over a necessary matter o' this sort.' Looky' here, Nelson, old pard, some'n has got to be done, an' it's got to be done in a damn big hurry."

"It will have to be done at twelve 'clock, anyway," Floyd said, calmly, a grim smile almost rising to his face. "That's the hour he's appointed."

"Do you mean to tell me you are a-goin' to set here like a knot on a log an' 'low that keen-eyed mountain sharp-shooter to step up in that door an' pin you to that stool?"

"No, I don't mean that, exactly, Pole," Floyd smiled, coldly. "A man ought not to insult even his antagonist that way. You see, that would be making the offended party liable for wilful, cold-blooded murder before the law. No, I've got my gun here in the drawer, and we'll make a pretence at fighting a duel, even if he downs me in the first round."

"You are a fool, that's what you are!" Pole was

## Pole Baker

angry, without knowing why. "Do you mean to tell me you are a-goin' to put yore life up like that to gratify a man o' Jeff Wade's stamp?"

"He's got his rights, Pole, and I intend to respect them," Floyd responded with firmness. "I've hurt his family pride, and I'd deserve to be kicked off the face of the earth if I turned tail and ran. He seems to think I may light out; I judge that by his setting the time a couple of hours ahead, but I'll give him satisfaction. I'm built that way, Pole. There is no use arguing about it."

The farmer stepped forward and laid a heavy hand on Floyd's shoulder, and stared at him from beneath his lowering brows.

"You know, as well as I do, that you wasn't the only man that—that dabbled in that dirty business," he said, sharply, "an' it's derved foolish fer you to—"

"I'm the only one he's charging with it," broke in the merchant, "and that settles it. I'm not an overgrown baby, Pole. Right now you are trying to get me to act in a way that would make you heartily ashamed of me. You might as well dry up. I'm not going to run. I'm going to meet Jeff Wade, fair and square, as a man—as I'd want him to meet me under like circumstances."

"My God! my God!" Pole said under his breath. "Hush! thar comes Mayhew. I reckon you don't want him to know about it."

"No, he'd be in for swearing out a peace-warrant. For all you do, Pole, don't let him onto it. I've got to write a letter or two before Wade comes; don't let the old man interrupt me."

## Pole Baker

"I'll feel like I'm dancin' on yore scaffold," the farmer growled. "I want my mind free to—to study. Thar! he's stopped to speak to Joe Peters. Say, Nelson, I see Mel Jones down thar talkin' to a squad in front o' the door; they've got the'r heads packed together as close as sardines. I see through it now. My Lord, I see through *that*."

"What is it you see through, Pole?" Floyd looked up from Wade's note, his brow furrowed.

"Why, Mel's Jeff Wade's fust cousin; he's onto what's up, an' he's confidin' it to a few; it will be all over this town in five minutes, an' the women an' childern will hide out to keep from bein' hit. Thar they come in at the front now, an' they are around the old man like red ants over the body of a black one. He'll be onto it in a minute. Thar, see? What did I tell you? He's comin' this way. You can tell by the old duck's waddle that he is excited."

Floyd muttered something that escaped Pole's ears, and began writing. Mayhew came on rapidly, tapping his heavy cane on the floor, his eyes glued on the placid profile of his young partner.

"What's this I hear?" he panted. "Has Jeff Wade sent you word that he is comin' here to shoot you?"

Pole laughed out merrily, and, stepping forward, he slapped the old merchant familiarly on the arm. "It's a joke, Mr. Mayhew," he said. "I put it up on Mel Jones as me 'n him rid in town; he's always makin' fun o' women fer tattlin', an' said I to myse'f, said I, 'I'll see how deep that's rooted under yore hide, old chap,' an' so I made that up out o' whole cloth. I was jest tellin' Nelson, here, that I'd

## Pole Baker

bet a hoss to a ginger-cake that Mel ud not be able to keep it, an' he hain't. Nelson, by George, the triflin' skunk let it out inside o' ten minutes, although he swore to me he'd keep his mouth shet. I'll make 'im set up the drinks on that."

"Well, I don't like such jokes," Mayhew fumed. "Jokes like that and what's at the bottom of them don't do a reputable house any good. And I don't want any more of them. Do you understand, sir?"

"Oh yes, I won't do it ag'in," answered Pole, in an almost absent-minded tone. His eyes were now on Floyd, and, despite his assumed lightness of manner, the real condition of things was bearing heavily on him. Just then a rough-looking farmer, in a suit of home-made jeans, straw hat, and shoes worn through at the bottom, came back to them. He held in his hand the point of a plough, and looked nervously about him.

"Everybody's busy down in front," he said, "an' I want to git a quarter's wuth o' coffee." His glance, full of curiosity, was on Floyd's face. "I want to stay till Wade comes, *myself*, but my old woman's almost got a spasm. She says she seed enough bloodshed an' carnage durin' the war to do her, an' then she always liked Mr. Floyd. She says she'd mighty nigh as soon see an own brother laid out as him. Mr. Floyd sorter done us a favor two year back when he stood fer us on our corn crop, an', as fer me, why, of course, I—"

"Look here, Bill Champ," Pole burst out in a spontaneous laugh, "I thought you had more sense than to swallow a joke like that. Go tell yore old



## Pole Baker

woman that I started that tale jest fer pure fun. Nelson here an' Wade is good friends."

"Oh, well, ef that's it, I'm sold," the farmer said, sheepishly. "But from the way Mel Jones an' some more talked down thar a body would think you fellers was back here takin' Mr. Floyd's measure fer his box. I'll go quiet my wife. She couldn't talk of a thing all the way here this mornin' but a new dress she was goin' to git, an' now she's fer hurryin' back without even pickin' out the cloth."

"No, I don't like this sort o' thing," old Mayhew growled as the customer moved away. "An' I want you to remember that, Baker."

"Oh, you dry up, old man!" Pole retorted, with sudden impatience. "You'd live longer an' enjoy life better ef you'd joke more. Ef the marrow o' my bones was as sour as yore'n is I'd cut my throat or go into the vinegar business."

At this juncture Captain Duncan came in the store and walked back to the trio.

"Good-morning," he said, cheerily. "Say, Floyd, I've heard the news, and thought if you wanted to borrow a pair of real good, old-fashioned duelling pistols, why, I've got some my father owned. They were once used by General—" .

"It's all a joke, captain," Pole broke in, winking at the planter, and casting a look of warning at the now unobservant Mayhew.

"Oh, is *that* it?" Duncan was quick of perception. "To tell you the truth, I thought so, boys. Yes, yes—" He was studying Floyd's calm face admiringly. "Yes, it sounded to me like a prank somebody was playing. Well, I thought I'd go fishing

## Pole Baker

this evening, and came in to get some hooks and lines. Fine weather, isn't it? but the river's muddy. I'll go down and pick out some tackle."

He had just gone when an old woman, wearing a cheap breakfast shawl over her gray head, a dress of dingy solid-black calico, and a pair of old, heavy shoes, approached from the door in the rear.

"I got yore summons, Mr. Mayhew," she said, in a thin, shaky voice. "Peter, my husband, was so down-hearted that he wouldn't come to town, an' so I had to do it. So you are goin' to foreclose on us? The mule an' cow is all on earth we've got to make the crop on, and when they are gone we will be plumb ruined."

The face of the old merchant was like carved stone.

"You got the goods, didn't you, Mrs. Stark?" he asked, harshly.

"Oh yes, we hain't disputin' the account," she answered, plaintively.

"And you agreed faithfully if you didn't pay this spring that the mule and cow would be our property?"

"Oh yes, of course. As I say, Mr. Mayhew, I'm not blamin' you-uns. Thar hain't a thing for me an' Peter to do but thrust ourselves on my daughter and son-in-law over in Fannin', but I'd rather die than go. We won't be welcome; they are loaded down with childern too young to work. So it's settled, Mr. Mayhew—I mean, ef we drive over the mule an' cow, thar won't be no lawsuit?"

"No, there won't be any suit. I'd let this pass and give you more time, Mrs. Stark, but a thing

## Pole Baker

like that can't be kept quiet through the country, an' there are fifty customers of ours over your way who'd be runnin' here with some cock-and-bull story, and we'd be left high and dry, with goods to pay for in market and nothing to show for it. We make our rules, Mrs. Stark, and they are clearly understood at the time the papers are signed."

"Never you mind, Mrs. Stark, I'll fix that all right." It was Nelson Floyd who was speaking, and with a face full of pity and tenderness he had stepped forward and was offering to shake hands.

The little woman, her lips twitching and drawn, gave him her hand, her eyes wide open in groping wonder.

"I don't understand, Nelson — Mr. Floyd — you mean—"

"I mean that I'll have your entire account charged to me and you can take your time about paying it—next fall, or the next, or any time it suits you. I'll not press you fer it, if you never pay it. I passed your place the other day and your crop looks very promising. You are sure to get out of debt this coming fall."

"Oh, Nelson—I—I don't know what to do about it. You see Mr. Mayhew says—"

"But I say it's all right," Floyd broke in, as he laid his hand softly on her shoulder. "Go down in front and buy what you need to run on. I'll assume the risk, if there is any."

Mayhew turned suddenly; his face wore a fierce frown and his thick lip shook.

"Do you mean to say, Nelson, that you are going to step in and—"

## Pole Baker

"Step in nothing!" Floyd said, calmly. "I hope I won't have to remind you, sir, of our clearly written agreement of partnership, in which it is plainly stated that I may use my judgment in regard to customers whenever I wish."

"You'll ruin us—you'll break us all to smash, if you do this sort of thing," Mayhew panted. "It will upset our whole system."

"I don't agree with you, sir," Floyd answered, tartly, "but we won't argue about it. If you don't intend to abide by our agreement, then say so and we will part company."

Mayhew stared in alarm for a moment, then he said:

"There's no use talking about parting. I only want to kind of hold you in check. You get your sympathies stirred up and make plunges sometimes when you ought to act with a clear, impartial head. You say the crop looks well; then it's all right. Go ahead, Mrs. Stark. Anything Nelson does is agreeable to me."

"Well, it's mighty good of you both," the old woman said, wiping tears of joy from her eyes. "But I won't buy anything to-day. I'll ride out to the farm as quick as I can and tell Peter the good news. He's mighty nigh out of his senses about it."

Mayhew followed her down into the store. It was as if he were ashamed to meet the quizzical look which Pole Baker had fixed upon him. He had no sooner turned his back than Pole faced Floyd, his heavy brows drawn together, his every feature working under stress of deep emotion.

"They say the Almighty is a just and a good

## Pole Baker

God," Pole said. "But I'll deny it all the rest o' my life ef He lets Jeff Wade shoot down sech a specimen o' manhood as you are fer jest that one slip, after—after, I say, after fillin' you with the fire of youth an' puttin' right in yore track a gal like that Minnie Wade, with a pair o' dare-devil eyes an' a shape that ud make a Presbyterian preacher—"

"Dry up, Pole!" Floyd cried, suddenly. "Don't forget yourself in your worry about me. A man is always more to blame than a woman, and it's only the cowards that shirk the consequences."

"Well, you have it yore way, an' I'll have it mine," Pole snorted. "What both of us think hain't got a damn thing to do with the time o' day. How does she stand by your ticker?"

Floyd looked at his watch. "It's a quarter-past eleven," he said.

"The hell it is!" Pole went to the back-door and looked out at the dreary stable-yard and barn. He stood there for several minutes in deep thought, then he seemed to make up his mind on something that was troubling him, for he suddenly thrust his hand into his hip-pocket, turned his back on Floyd, drew out a revolver, and rapidly twirled the cylinder with his heavy thumb.

"Yes, I 'lowed I'd swore off from shootin'-scrapes," he mused; "but I shore have to git in this un. I'd never look Sally an' the childern in the face ag'in ef I was to stand still an' let that dead-shot kill the best friend me an' them ever had. No, Poley, old boy, you've got to enlist this mornin', an' thar hain't no two ways about it. I'd take a drink on it, but a feller's aim ain't wuth a dang when he sees double."

## Pole Baker

His attention was suddenly attracted to Floyd, who had left his stool and was putting a revolver into the pocket of his sack-coat. Pole shoved his own cautiously back into his pocket and went to his friend's side.

"What you goin' to do now?" he asked.

"I have just thought of something that ought to be attended to," was the young merchant's answer. "Is Mel Jones still down there?"

"Yes, I see 'im now through the left-hand window," said Pole. "Do you want to speak to 'im?"

"Yes." Floyd moved in the direction indicated, and Pole wonderingly followed. Outside on the pavement, at the corner of the store, Jones stood talking to a group of eager listeners. He stopped when he saw Floyd and looked in the opposite direction, but in a calm voice the young merchant called him.

"Mel, may I see you a minute?"

"Certainly." The face of the gaunt farmer fell as he came forward, his eyes shifting uneasily.

"I got a message from Jeff Wade just now," said Floyd.

"Oh, did you?—is that so?" the fellow exclaimed.

"Yes, he says he has a private matter to settle with me, and says he'll be here at the store at twelve. Now, as you see, Mel, there are a good many people standing around—women and children—and somebody might get hurt or frightened. You know where Price's spring is, down behind the old brick-yard?"

"Oh yes, I know where it is, Floyd."

## Pole Baker

"Well, you will do me a favor if you will ride out to Wade's and tell him I'll meet him there. He could reach it without coming through town, and we'd escape a lot of prying people who would only be in the way."

"That's a good idea," said Jones, his strong face lighting up. "Yes, I'll go tell 'im. I'm glad to see that you are a man o' backbone, Floyd. Some 'lowed that you'd throw up the sponge an' leave fer parts unknown, but Jeff's got to tackle the rale stuff. I kin see that, Floyd. Minnie's raised a lots o' devilment, an' my wife says she don't blame you one bit, but Jeff cayn't be expected to see it through a woman's eyes. I wish you was goin' to meet a man that wasn't sech a dead-shot. I seed Jeff knock a squirrel out of a high tree with his six-shooter that three men had missed with rifles."

"I'll try to take care of myself, Mel. But you'd better hurry up and get to him before he starts to town."

"Oh, I'll git 'im all right," said the farmer, and he went out to the hitching-rack, mounted his horse, and galloped away.

The group Jones had been talking to now drew near.

"It's all off, boys!" Pole said, with one of his inscrutable laughs. "Explanations an' apologies has been exchanged—no gore to-day. Big mistake, anyway, all round. Big, big blunder."

This version soon spread, and a sigh of relief went up from all sides. Fifteen minutes passed. Pole was standing in the front-door of the store, cautiously watching Floyd, who had gone back to his desk to

## Pole Baker

write a letter. Suddenly the farmer missed him from his place.


"He's tryin' to give me the slip," Pole said. "He's gone out at the back-door and has made fer the spring. Well, he kin *think* he's throwed old Pole off, but he hain't by a jugful. I know now which road Jeff Wade will come by, an' I'll see 'im fust ur no prayers hain't answered."

He went out to the hitching-rack, mounted, and, waving his hand to the few bystanders who were eying him curiously, he rode away, his long legs swinging back and forth from the flanks of his horse. A quarter of a mile outside of the village he came to a portion of the road leading to Jeff Wade's house that was densely shaded, and there he drew rein and dismounted.

"Thar hain't no other way fer 'im to come," he said, "an' I'm his meat or he is mine—that is, unless the dern fool kin be fetched to reason."



## VIII

HERE was a quilting-party at Porter's that day. Cynthia had invited some of her friends to help her, and the quilt, a big square of colored scraps, more or less artistically arranged in stars, crescents, and floral wreaths, occupied the centre of the sitting-room. It was stitched to a frame made of four smooth wooden bars which were held together at the corners by pegs driven into gimlet-holes and which rested on the backs of four chairs. The workers sat on two sides of it, and stitched with upward and downward strokes, towards the centre, the quilt being rolled up as the work progressed.

Hattie Mayhew was there, and Kitty Welborn, and two or three others. As usual, they were teasing Cynthia about the young preacher.

"I know he's dead in love," laughed Kitty Welborn. "He really can't keep from looking at her during preaching. I noticed it particularly one Sunday not long ago, and told Matt Digby that I'd be sure to get religion if a man bored it into me with big, sad eyes like his."

"I certainly would go up to the mourners' bench every time he called for repentant sinners," said Hattie Mayhew. "I went up once while he was exhorting, and he didn't even take my hand. He

## Pole Baker

turned me over to Sister Perdue, that snaggle-toothed old maid who always passes the wine at sacrament, and that done me."

Cynthia said nothing, but she smiled good-naturedly as she rose from her chair and went to the side of the quilt near the crudely screened fireplace to see that the work was rolled evenly on the frame. While thus engaged, her father came into the room, vigorously fanning himself with his old slouch hat. The girls knew he had been to the village, and all asked eagerly if he had brought them any letters.

"No, I clean forgot to go to the office," he made slow answer, as he threw himself into a big arm-chair with a raw-hide bottom near a window on the shaded side of the house.

"Why, father," his daughter chided him, "you promised the girls faithfully to call at the office. I think that was very neglectful of you when you knew they would be here to dinner."

"And he usually has a good memory," spoke up Mrs. Porter, appearing in the door-way leading to the dining-room and kitchen. She was rolling flakes of dough from her lank hands, and glanced at her husband reprovingly. "Nathan, what *did* you go and do that way for, when you knew Cynthia was trying to make her friends pass a pleasant day?"

"Well, I clean forgot it," Porter said, quite undisturbed. "To tell you the truth, thar was so much excitement on all hands, with this un runnin' in with fresh news, an' another sayin' that maybe it was all a false alarm, that the post-office plumb slipped out o' my head. Huh! I hain't thought post-office once sense I left here. I don't know

## Pole Baker

whether I could 'a' got waited on, anyway, fer the postmaster hisse'f was runnin' round outside like a chicken with its head chopped off. Besides, I tell you, gals, I made up my mind to hit the grit. I never was much of a hand to want to see wholesale bloodshed. Moreover, I've heard of many a spectator a-gittin' shot in the arms an' legs or some vital spot. No, I sorter thought I'd come on. Mandy, have you seed anything o' my fly-flap? When company's here you an' Cynthia jest try yoreselves on seein' how many things you kin stuff in cracks an' out-o'-way places. I'm gittin' sick an' tired o'—"

"Nathan, what's going on in town?" broke in Mrs. Porter. "What are you talking about?"

"I don't know what's goin' on *now*," Porter drawled out, as he slapped at a fly on his bald pate with an angry hand. "I say I don't know what's goin' on right at this minute, but I know what was jest gittin' ready to go on when I skipped. I reckon the coroner's goin' on with the inquest ef he ain't afeared of an ambush. Jeff Wade—" Porter suddenly bethought himself of something, and he rose, passed through the composite and palpable stare of the whole room, and went to the clock on the mantel-piece and opened it. "Thar!" he said, impatiently. "I wonder what hole you-uns have stuck my chawin'-tobacco in. I put it in the corner of this clock, right under the turpentine-bottle."

"There's your fool tobacco," Mrs. Porter exclaimed, running forward and taking the dark plug from beneath the clock. "Fill your mouth with it, maybe it will unlock your jaw. What is the trouble at Springtown?"

## Pole Baker

"I was jest startin' to tell you," said Porter, diving into his capacious trousers-pocket for his knife, and slowly opening the blade with his long thumb-nail. "You see, Jeff Wade has at last got wind o' all that gab about Minnie an' Nelson Floyd, an' he sent a war-cry by Pole Baker on hoss-back as fast as Pole could clip it to tell Floyd to arm an' be ready at exactly twelve o'clock, sharp."

"I knew it would come," said Mrs. Porter, a combination of finality and resignation in her harsh voice. "I knew Jeff Wade wasn't going to allow that to go on." She was looking at her daughter, who, white and wide-eyed, stood motionless behind Hattie Mayhew's chair. For a moment no one spoke, though instinctively the general glance went to Cynthia, who, feeling it, turned to the window looking out upon the porch, and stood with her back to the room. Mrs. Porter broke the silence, her words directed to her daughter.

"Jeff Wade will kill that man if he was fool enough to wait and meet him. Do you think Floyd waited, Nathan?"

"No, he didn't wait," was Porter's answer. "The plucky chap went 'im one better. He sent word by Mel Jones to Wade that it would be indecent to have a rumpus like that in town on a Saturday, when so many women an' childern was settin' round in bullet-range, an' so if it was agreeable he'd ruther have it in the open place at Price's Spring. Mel passed me as he was goin' to Jeff with that word. It's nearly one o'clock now, an' it's my candid opinion publicly expressed that Nelson Floyd has gone to meet a higher power. I didn't want to be

## Pole Baker

hauled up at court as a witness, an' so, as I say, I hit the grit. I've been tied up in other folks's matters before this, an' the court don't allow enough fer witness-fees to tempt me to set an' listen to them long-winded lawyers talk fer a whole week on a stretch."

"Poor fellow!" exclaimed Hattie Mayhew. "I'm right sorry for him. He was so handsome and sweet-natured. He had faults and bad ones, if what folks say is true, but they may have been due to the hard life he had when he was a child. I must say I have always been sorry for him; he had the saddest look about the eyes of any human being I ever saw."

"And he knew how to use his eyes, too," was the sting Mrs. Porter added to this charitable comment, while her sharp gaze still rested on her daughter.

There was a sound at the window. Cynthia, with unsteady hands, was trying to raise the sash. She finally succeeded in doing this, and in placing the wooden prop under it. There was a steely look in her eyes and her features were rigidly set, her face pale.

"It's very warm in here," they heard her say. "There isn't a bit of draught in this room. It's that hot cook-stove. Mother, I will—I—"

She turned and walked from the room. Mrs. Porter sighed, as she nodded knowingly and looked after the departing form.

"Did you notice her face, girls?" she asked. "It was as white as death itself. She looked as if she was about to faint. It's all this talk about Floyd. Well, they *were* sort of friends. I tried to get her

## Pole Baker

to stop receiving his attentions, but she thought she knew better. Well, he has got his deserts, I reckon."

"And all on account of that silly Minnie Wade," cried Kitty Welborn, "when you know, as well as I do, Mrs. Porter, that Thad Pelham—" The speaker glanced at Nathan Porter, and paused.

"Oh, you needn't let up on yore hen-cackle on my account," that blunt worthy made haste to say. "I'll go out an' look at my new hogs. You gals are out fer a day o' pleasure, an' I wouldn't interfere with the workin' of yore jaws fer a purty."

Mrs. Porter didn't remain to hear Kitty Welborn finish her observation, but followed her daughter. In the dining-room, adjoining, an old woman sat at a window. She was dressed in dingy black calico, her snowy hair brushed smoothly down over a white, deeply wrinkled brow, and was fanning herself feebly with a turkey-feather fan. She had Mrs. Porter's features and thinness of frame.

"Mother," Mrs. Porter said, pausing before her, "didn't Cynthia come in here just now?"

"Yes, she did," replied the old woman, sharply. "She *did*. And I just want to know, Mandy, what you all have been saying to her in there. I want to know, I say."

"We haven't been saying anything to her, as I know of," said the farmer's wife, in slow, studious surprise.

"I know you have—I say, I know you *have*!" The withered hand holding the fan quivered in excitement. "I know you have; I can always tell when that poor child is worried. I heard a little of it, too,

## Pole Baker

but not all. I heard them mention Hillhouse's name. I tell you, I am not going to sit still and let a whole pack of addle-pated women tease as good a girl as Cynthia is plumb to death."

"I don't think they were troubling her," Mrs. Porter said, her face drawn in thought, her mind elsewhere.

"I know they *were!*" the old woman insisted. "She may have hidden it in there before you all, but when she came in here just now she stopped right near me and looked me full in the face, and never since she was a little baby have I seen such an odd look in her eyes. She was about to cry. She saw me looking at her, and she come up behind me and laid her face down against my neck. She quivered all over, and then she said, 'Oh, granny! oh, granny!' and then she straightened up and went right out at that door into the yard. I tell you, it's got to let up. She sha'n't have the life devilled out of her. If she don't want to marry that preacher, she don't have to. As for me, I'd rather have married any sort of man on earth when I was young than a long-legged, straight-faced preacher."

"You say she went out in the yard?" said Mrs. Porter, absently. "I wonder what she went out there for."

Mrs. Porter went to the door and looked out. There was a clothes-line stretched between two apple-trees near by, and Cynthia stood at it taking down a table-cloth. She turned with it in her arms and came to her mother.

"I just remembered," she said, "that there isn't a clean cloth for the table. Mother, the iron is hot

## Pole Baker

on the stove. You go back to the girls and I'll smooth this out and set the table."

The eyes of the two met. Mrs. Porter took a deep breath. "All right," she said. "I'll go back to the company, but I've got something to say, and then I'm done for good. I want to say that I'm glad a daughter of mine has got the proper pride and spunk you have. I see you are not going to make a goose of yourself before visitors, and I'm proud of you. You are the right sort—especially after he's acted in the scandalous way he has, and—and laid you, even as good a girl as you, liable to be talked about for keeping company with him."

The girl's eyes sank. Something seemed to rise and struggle up within her, for her breast heaved and her shoulders quivered convulsively.

"I'll fix the cloth," she said, in a low, forced voice, "and then I'll set the table and call you."

"All right." Mrs. Porter was turning away. "I'll try to keep them entertained till you come back."



## IX



ENEATH a big oak Pole stood holding his bridle-rein and waiting, his earnest gaze on the long road leading to Jeff Wade's farm. Suddenly he descried a cloud of dust far ahead, and chuckled.

"He's certainly on time," he mused. "He must 'a' had his hoss already hitched out in the thicket. Mel made good time, too. The dern scamp wants to see bloodshed. Mel's that sort. By gum! that hain't Wade; it's Mel hisse'f, an' he's certainly layin' the lash to his animal."

In a gallop, Jones bore down on him, riding as recklessly as a cowboy, his broad hat in one hand, a heavy switch in the other. He drew rein wher he recognized Baker.

"Did you deliver that message?" Pole questioned.

"Oh yes, I finally got him alone; his wife seems to suspicion some'n, and she stuck to 'im like a leech. She's a jealous woman, Pole, an' I don't know but what she kinder thought Jeff was up to some o' his old shines. She's in a family-way, an' a little more cranky than common. He was a sorter tough nut before he married, you know, an' a man like that will do to watch."

"Well, what did he say?" Pole asked, as indifferently as his impatience would allow.

## Pole Baker

"Why, he said, 'All hunkeydory.' The spring plan ketched him jest right. He said that *one* thing—o' bloodyin' up the main street in town—had bothered him more than anything else. He admired it in Floyd, too. Jeff said: 'By gum! fer a town dude, that feller's got more backbone than I expected. He's a foe wuth meetin', an' I reckon killin' 'im won't be sech a terrible disgrace as I was afeard it mought be.'"

"But whar are you headin' fer in sech a rush?" Pole asked.

Jones laughed slyly as he put his hat carefully on his shaggy head and pressed the broad brims up on the sides and to a point in front. "Why, Pole," he answered, "to tell you the truth, I am headed fer that thar spring. I'm goin' to acknowledge to you that, as long as I've lived in this world, I hain't never been on hand at a shootin'-scrape. Mighty nigh every man I know has seed oodlin's of 'em, but my luck's been agin me. I was too young to be in the war, an' about the most excitin' thing I ever attended was a chicken-fight, and so I determined to see this through. I know a big rock jest above the spring, and I'm a-goin' to git thar in plenty o' time. You let me git kivered all but my eyes, an' I'll run the resk o' gettin' hit from thar up. Whar *you* makin' fer, Pole?"

"Me? Oh, I'm on the way home, Mel. I seed the biggest rattlesnake run across this road jest now I ever laid eyes on. I got down to settle his hash, but I didn't have anything to hit 'im with, an' I'm done stompin' on them fellers sence Tobe Baker, my cousin, over at Hillbend, got bluffed in the knee-j'int."

## Pole Baker

"Well, so long," Jones laughed. "I'll hunt rattlesnakes some other time. Are you plumb shore you hain't got the jimmies ag'in, Pole? Take my advice an' don't tell anybody about seein' snakes; it sets folks to thinkin'. Why, I seed you once in broad daylight when you swore black spiders was playin' sweepstakes on yore shirt-front."

"So long, Mel," Pole smiled. He made a fair pretence at getting ready to mount as Jones galloped away in a cloud of dust. The rider was scarcely out of sight when a pair of fine black horses drawing a buggy came into view. The vehicle contained Captain Duncan and his daughter Evelyn. She was a delicate, rather pretty girl of nineteen or twenty, and she nodded haughtily to Pole as her father stopped his horses.

"You are sure that thing's off, are you, Baker?" the planter said, with a genial smile.

"Oh yes, captain." Pole had his eyes on the young lady and had taken off his hat, and stood awkwardly swinging it against the baggy knees of his rough trousers.

"Well, I'm very glad," Duncan said. "I heard you'd told some of the crowd back at the store that it had been settled, but I didn't know whether the report was reliable or not."

Pole's glance shifted between plain truth and Evelyn Duncan's refined face for a moment, and then he nodded. "Oh yes, it was all a mistake, captain. Reports get out, you know; and nothin' hain't as bad as gossip is after it's crawled through a hundred mouths an' over a hundred envious tongues."

## Pole Baker

"Well, I'm glad, as I say," the planter said, and he jerked his reins and spoke to his horses.

As he whirled away, Pole growled. "Derned ef I hain't a-makin' a regular sign-post out o' myself," he mused, "an' lyin' to beat the Dutch. Ef that blasted fool don't hurry on purty soon I'll—but thar he is now, comin' on with a swoop. His hoss is about to run from under 'im, his dern legs is so long. Now, looky' here, Pole Baker, Esquire, hog-thief an' liar, you are up agin about the most serious proposition you ever tackled, an' ef you don't mind what you are about you'll have cold feet inside o' ten minutes by the clock. You've set in to carry this thing through or die in the attempt, an' time's precious. The fust thing is to stop the blamed whelp; you cayn't reason with a man that's flyin' through the air like he's shot out of a gun, an' Jeff Wade's a-goin' to be the devil to halt. He's got the smell o' blood, an' that works on a mad man jest like it does on a bloodhound—he's a-goin' to run some'n down. The only thing in God's world that 'll stop a man in that fix is to insult 'im, an' I reckon I'll have that to do in this case."

Jeff Wade was riding rapidly. Just before he reached Pole he drew out his big, silver, open-faced watch and looked at it. He wore no coat and had on a gray flannel-shirt, open at the neck. Round his waist he wore a wide leather belt, from which, on his right side, protruded the glittering butt of a revolver of unusual size and length of barrel. Suddenly Pole led his own horse round until the animal stood directly across the narrow road, rendering it

## Pole Baker

impossible for the approaching rider to pass at the speed he was going.

"Hold on thar, Jeff!" Pole held up his hand. "Whar away? The mail-hack hain't in yet. I've jest left town."

"I hain't goin' after no mail!" Wade said, his lips tight, a fixed stare in his big, earnest eyes. "I'm headed fer Price's Spring. I'm goin' to put a few holes in that thar Nelson Floyd, ef I git the drap on him 'fore he does on me."

"Huh!" Pole ejaculated; "no, you hain't a-goin' to see him, nuther—that is, not till me 'n you've had a talk, Jeff Wade. You seem in a hurry, but thar's a matter betwixt me an' you that's got to be attended to."

"What the hell d' you mean?" Wade demanded, a stare of irritated astonishment dawning in his eyes.

"Why, I mean that Nelson Floyd is a friend o' mine, an' he ain't a-goin' to be shot down like a dog by a man that could hit a nickel a hundred yards away nine times out o' ten. You an' me's face to face, an' I reckon chances 'ud be somewhar about equal. I hain't a brag shot, but I could hit a pouch as big as yourn is, at close range, about as easy as you could me."

"You—you—by God! do you mean to take this matter up?"

Jeff Wade slid off his horse and stood facing Pole.

"Yes, I do, Jeff—that is, unless you'll listen to common-sense. That's what I'm here fer. I'm a-goin' to stuff reason into you ef I have to make a hole to put it in at. You are a-goin' entirely too fast to live in an enlightened Christian age. an' I'm

## Pole Baker

here to call a halt. I've got some things to tell you. They are a-goin' to hurt like pullin' eye-teeth, an' you may draw yore gun before I'm through, but I'm goin' to make a try at it."

"What the hell do you—"

"Hold on, hold on, hold on, Jeff!" Pole raised a warning hand. "Keep that paw off'n that cannon in yore belt or thar'll be a war right here before you hear my proclamation of the terms we kin both live under. Jeff, I am yore neighbor an' friend. I love you mighty nigh like a brother, but I'm here to tell you that, with all yore grit an' good qualities, you are makin' a bellowin' jackass o' yourself. An' ef I let you put through yore present plans, you'll weep in repentance fer it till you are let down in yore soggy grave. Thar's two sides to every question, an' you are lookin' only at yore side o' this un. You cayn't tell how sorry I am about havin' to take this step. I've been a friend to yore entire family—to yore brothers, an' yore old daddy, when he was alive. I mighty nigh swore a lie down in Atlanta to keep *him* out o' limbo, when he was arrested fer moonshinin'."

"I know all that!" growled Wade; "but, damn it, you—"

"Hold yore taters, now, an' listen. You mought as well take yore mind off'n that spring. You hain't a-goin' to git at Nelson Floyd without you walk over my dead body—an' thar's no efs an' an's about that. You try to mount that hoss, an' I'll kill you ef it's in my power. I say I've got some'n to tell you that you'll wish you'd listened to. I know some'n about Minnie that will put a new

## Pole Baker

color on this whole nasty business; an' when you know it, ef you kill Nelson Floyd in cold blood the law will jerk that stiff neck o' your'n—jerk it till it's limber."

"You say you know some'n about Minnie?" The gaunt hand which till now had hovered over the butt of the big revolver hung straight down. Wade stood staring, his lip hanging loose, a sudden droop of indecision upon him.

"I know this much, Jeff," Pole said, less sharply, "I know you are not on the track o' the fust offender in that matter, an' when I prove *that* to you I don't believe you'll look at it the same."

"You say—you say—"

"Listen now, Jeff, an' don't fly off the handle at a well-wisher sayin' what he thinks has to be said in justice to all concerned. The truth is, you never seed Minnie like other folks has all along. You seed 'er grow up an' she was yore pet. To you she was a regular angel, but other folks has knowed all along, Jeff, that she was born with a sorter light nature. Women folks, with the'r keen eyes, has knowed that ever since she got out o' short dresses. Even yore own wife has said behind yore back a heap on this line that she was afeard to say to your face. Not a soul has dared to talk plain to you, an' even I wouldn't do it now except in this case o' life an' death."

Wade shook back his long, coarse hair. He was panting like a tired dog. "I don't believe a damn word of what you are a-sayin'," he muttered, "an' I'll make you prove it, by God, or I'll have yore life-blood!"

## Pole Baker

"Listen to me, Jeff," Pole said, gently. "I'm not goin' to threaten any more. Believe me or not, *but listen*. You remember when Thad Pelham went off to Mexico a year or so ago?"

Wade made no reply, but there was a look of groping comprehension in his great, bleary eyes.

"I see you remember that," Pole went on. "Well, you know, too, that he was goin' with Minnie a lot about that time—takin' her buggy-ridin' an' to meet-in'. He was a devil in pants, Jeff—his whole family was bad. The men in it would refuse the last call to go in at the gate o' heaven ef a designin' woman was winkin' at 'em on the outside. Well, Thad started fer Mexico one day, an' at the same time Minnie went on a visit to yore brother Joe in Calhoun."

"She went thar a year ago," Wade put in, "fer I bought 'er ticket myself at Darley."

"She told *you* she went to Calhoun." Pole's eyes were mercifully averted. "Jeff, I met her an' Thad down in Atlanta."

Wade caught his breath. He shook from head to foot as with a chill.

"You say—Pole, you say—"

"Yes, I met 'em comin' out o' the Globe Hotel—that little resort jest off'n Decatur Street. They was comin' out o' the side-door, an' me an' them met face to face. Minnie, she turned as white as a sheet, but Thad sorter laughed like it was a good joke, an' winked at me. I bowed to 'em an' passed on, but I seed 'em lookin' back, an' then they motioned to me to stop, an' they come to me. Minnie set in to cryin' an' begun tellin' me not to



## Pole Baker

take the news back home—that her an' Thad loved each other so much she jest *had* to play the trick on you an' go as fur as Atlanta with 'im. She said he was comin' back after he got located, an' that they was goin' to git decently married an' so on. An' that devilish Thad smiled an' sorter pulled his cheek down from his left eye an' said, 'Yes, Pole, we are a-goin' to git married. That is, when the proper times comes.'"

A sigh escaped Jeff Wade's tense lips.

"Are you plumb shore the two done wrong down thar, Baker?" he asked.

Pole pulled his mustache and looked at the ground. A smile dawned and died on his face.

"Well, I reckon they wasn't down thar to attend a Sunday-school convention, Jeff. They didn't have that look to me. But I was so worried fer fear I mought be doin' a woman injustice in my mind, that, after they left me, to make sure, I went in the office o' the hotel. The clerk was standin' thar doin' nothin', an' so I axed 'im who that young couple was that had jest gone out, an' he laughed an' said they was a newly married pair from up in the mountains—'Mr. an' Mrs. Sam Buncombe,' an' he showed me whar Thad had writ the names in his scrawlin' hand-write on the book. The clerk said that fer a freshly linked couple they headed off any he'd ever had in his bridal-chamber. He said they was orderin' some sort o' drink every minute in the day, an' that they made so much racket overhead that he had to stop 'em several times. He said they danced jigs an' sung nigger songs. He said he'd never married hisse'f—that he'd always

## Pole Baker

been afeard to make the ruffle, but that ef he could be shore matrimony was like that, that he'd find him a consort 'fore sundown or break his neck tryin'."

Suddenly Wade put out his hand and laid it heavily on Pole's shoulder. "Looky' here, Baker," he said, "if you are lying to me, I—"

"Hold on, *hold on*, Jeff Wade!" Pole broke in sternly. "When you use words like them don't you look serious! So fur, this has been a friendly talk, man to man, as I see it; but you begin to intimate that I'm a liar, an' I'll try my best to make you chaw the statement. You're excited, but you must watch whar yore a-walkin'."

"Well, I want the truth, by God, *I want the truth!*"

"Well, you are a-gittin' it, with the measure runnin' over," Pole said, "an' that ought to satisfy any reasonable man."

"So you think, then, that Nelson Floyd never done any—any o' the things folks says he did—that trip to the circus at Darley, when Minnie said she was stayin' all night with the Halsey gals over the mountains—that was just report?"

"Well, I ain't here to say that, *nuther*," said Pole, most diplomatically. "Nelson Floyd ain't any more'n human, Jeff. His wings hain't sprouted—at least, they ain't big enough to show through his clothes. He's like you used to be before you married an' quit the turf, only—ef I'm any judge—you was a hundred times wuss. Ef all the men concerned in this county was after you like you are after Nelson Floyd, they'd be on yore track wuss'n a pack o' yelpin' wolves."

## Pole Baker

"Oh, hell! let up on me an' what I've done! I kin take care o' myself," Wade snarled.

"All right, Jeff," Pole laughed. "I was only drappin' them hints on my way to my point. Well, Minnie she come back from Atlanta, an' fer three whole days she looked to me like she missed Thad, but she got to goin' with the Thornton boys, an' then Nelson Floyd run across her track. I ain't here to make excuses fer 'im, but she was every bit as much to blame as he was. He's been around some, an' has enough sense to git in out o' the rain, an' I reckon he had his fun, or he wouldn't be a-settin' at Price's Spring waitin' to meet death at the end o' that gun o' yourn."

Jeff Wade turned an undecided, wavering glance upon the towering mountain on his right. He drew a deep breath and seemed about to speak, but checked himself.

"But la me! what a stark, ravin' fool you was about to make o' yoreself, Jeff!" Pole went on. "You started to do this thing to-day on yore sister's account, when by doin' it you would bust up her home an' make the rest of her life miserable."

"You mean—"

"I mean that Joe Mitchell, that's been dead-stuck on Minnie sence she was a little gal, set up to her an' proposed marriage. They got engaged, an' then every old snaggle-toothed busybody in these mountains set in to try to bust it up by totin' tales about Floyd an' others to 'im. As fast as one would come, Minnie'd kill it, an' show Joe what a foolish thing it was to listen to gossip, an' Joe finally told 'em all to go to hell, an' they was married, an' moved on his

## Pole Baker

farm in Texas. From all accounts, they are doin' well an' are happy, but, la me! they wouldn't be that away long ef you'd 'a' shot Nelson Floyd this mornin'."

"You say they wouldn't, Pole?"

"Huh, I reckon *you* wouldn't dance a jig an' sing hallelujah ef you was to pick up a newspaper this mornin' an' read in type a foot long that yore wife's brother, in another state, had laid a man out stiff as a board fer some'n' that had tuck place sometime back betwixt the man an' her."

"Huh!" Wade's glance was now on Pole's face. "Huh, I reckon you are right, Pole. I reckon you are right. I wasn't thinkin' about that."

"Thar was *another* duty you wasn't a-thinkin' about, too," Pole said. "An' that is yore duty to yore wife an' childern that would be throwed helpless on the world ef this thing had 'a' tuck place to-day."

"Well, I don't see *that*, anyway," said Wade, dejectedly.

"Well, *I* do, Jeff. You see, ef you'd 'a' gone on an' killed Floyd, after I halted you, I'd 'a' been a witness agin you, an' I'd 'a' had to testify that I told you, in so many words, whar the *rale* blame laid, an' no jury alive would 'a' spared yore neck."

"I reckon that's so," Wade admitted. "Well, I guess I'll go back, Pole; I won't go any further with it. I promise you not to molest that scamp. I'll not trade any more at his shebang, an' I'll avoid 'im all I kin, but I'll not kill 'im as I intended."

"Now you're a-talkin' with a clear head an' a clean tongue." Pole drew a breath of relief, and stood

## Pole Baker

silent as Wade pulled his horse around, put his foot into the heavy, wooden stirrup, and mounted. Pole said nothing until Wade had slowly ridden several paces homeward, then he called out to him and beckoned him back, going to meet him, leading his horse.

"I jest thought o' some'n' else, Jeff—some'n' I want to say fer myself. I reckon I won't sleep sound to-night or think of anything the rest o' the day ef I don't git it off my mind."

"What's that, Pole?"

"Why, I don't feel right about callin' you to halt so rough jest now, an' talkin' about shootin' holes in you an' the like, fer I hain't nothin' agin you, Jeff. In fact, I'm yore friend now more than I ever was in all my life. I feel fer you *way down inside o' me*. That look on yore face cuts me as keen as a knife. I—I reckon, Jeff, you sorter feel like—like yore little sister's dead, don't you?"

The rough face looking down from the horse filled. "Like she was dead an' buried, Pole," Wade answered.

"Well, Jeff" — Pole's voice was husky — "don't you ever think o' what I said awhile ago about shootin'. Jeff, I jest did that to git yore attention. You mought a-blazed away at me, but I'll be danged ef I believe I could 'a' cocked or pulled trigger on you to 'a' saved my soul from hell."

"Same here, old neighbor," said Wade, as he wiped his eyes on his shirt-sleeve. "I wouldn't 'a' tuck them words from no other man on the face o' God's green globe."

When Wade had ridden slowly away, Pole mounted his own horse.

## Pole Baker

"Now I'll go tell Nelson that the danger is over," he said. Suddenly, however, he reined his horse in and sat looking thoughtfully at the ground.

"No, I won't," he finally decided. "He kin set thar an' wonder what's up. It won't hurt him to be in doubt, dab blame his hot-blooded skin. Thar I was in a hair's-breadth of eternity, about to leave a sweet wife an' kids to starvation an' tumble in a bloody grave, jest beca'se a rich chap like he is had to have his dirty bout. No, Nelsy, my boy, you look old Death in the eye fer awhile; it won't do you no harm. Maybe it 'll cool you off a little."

And Pole Baker rode to the thicket where he had hidden his bag of corn-meal that morning and took it home.

## X



THAT afternoon, for Cynthia Porter, dragged slowly along. The quilt was finished, duly admired, and laid away. The visiting girls put on their sun-bonnets about four o'clock and went home. No further news had come from the village in regard to the impending duel, and each girl hurried away in the fluttering hope that she would be the first to hear of the outcome.

Fifty times during the remainder of the afternoon Cynthia went to the front-door to see if any one was passing from whom she might hear what had happened, but the road leading by the house was not a main-travelled one, and she saw only the shadows fall in advance of the long twilight and heard the dismal lowing of the cows as they swaggered homeward from the pasture. Then it was night, and with the darkness a great weight descended on her young heart that nothing could lift.

The simple supper was over by eight o'clock. Her father and mother retired to their room, and she went, perforce, to hers. Outside the still night, with its pitiless moonlight, seemed to be a vast, breathless thing under the awful consciousness of tragedy, deeper than the mere mystery of the grave. Dead! Nelson Floyd dead! How impossible

## Pole Baker

a thing it seemed, and yet how could it be otherwise? She threw herself on her bed without undressing, and lay there staring at her flickering tallow-dip and its yellow, beckoning ghost in her tilted mirror. Suddenly she heard a step in the hall. It was a faint, shuffling one, accompanied by the soft slurring of a hand cautiously sliding along the wall. The girl sat up on the bed wonderingly, and then the door was softly opened and her grandmother came in, and with bent form advanced to her.

"Sh!" the old woman said, raising a warning hand. "I don't want your ma and pa to know I came here, darling. They wouldn't understand it. But I had to come; I couldn't sleep."

"Oh, granny, you oughtn't to be up this way!" exclaimed Cynthia. "You know it is long past your bedtime."

"I know that, honey, I know that," said the old woman; "but to be late once in a while won't hurt me. Besides, as I said, I couldn't sleep, anyway, and so I came in to you. I knew you were wide awake—I felt that. You see, honey, your ma can't keep anything—even anything she wants to be silent on has to come out, sooner or later, and I discovered what was the matter with you this morning. You see, darling, knowing what your trouble was, old granny felt that it was her duty to try to comfort you all she could."

"Oh, granny, granny!" cried the girl, covering her face with her hands.

"The trouble is, I don't know what to say," continued the old woman; "but I thought I'd tell you what pride will do sometimes, when anybody calls



## Pole Baker

in its aid. If—if what they all think is so—if the young man *has* really lost his life in—in a matter of such a questionable nature, then your womanly pride ought to back you up considerably. I have never alluded to it, Cynthia, for I haven't been much of a hand to encourage ideas of superiority in one person over another, but away back in the history of the Radcliffes and the Cuylers and the Prestons, who were our kin in Virginia, I've been told that the women were beautiful, and great belles in the society at Richmond, before and, after the Revolution. Why, honey, I can remember my grandmother telling us children about being at big balls and dinners where George Washington was entertained, and lords and ladies of the old country. I was too young to understand what it meant, but I remember she told us about the great droves of negroes her father owned, and the carriages and silver, and the big grants of land from the king to him. One of her uncles was a royal governor, whose wife was a lady of high title. I was talking to Colonel Price about a month ago at the veteran's meeting at Cohutta Springs, and he said he had run across a family history about the Radcliffes where it said all of them came down from the crowned heads of England. I believe he was right, putting all I remember to what he said, and, lying in bed just now, it struck me that maybe one of those ladies away back there would not let a tear drop from her proud eyes over—over a young man who had met with misfortune as a consequence of bad conduct. Ever since you were a little girl I have been proud of your looks, honey. You have

## Pole Baker

fine, delicate features; your hands are small and taper to the end of the fingers, and your ankles are slender like a fine-blooded race-horse, and your feet have high insteps and are pretty in shape. We are poor; we have been so such a long time that almost all record of the old wealth and power has passed out of our memory, but a few generations of poverty won't kill well-grounded pride and dignity."

"Oh, granny, granny, you needn't talk to me so," Cynthia said, calmly. "I know what you mean, and you sha'n't be ashamed of me. I promise you that."

"I believe you, Cynthia, for you are showing self-respect right now. Go to bed, dear, and take your mind off of it. I'm going now. Good-night."

"Good-night, granny." Cynthia stood up, and with her arms around the frail, bowed old woman, she tenderly kissed her on the brow and led her to the door."

"Pride!" she muttered, as the old woman's steps rang in the corridor. "Pride is only a word. *This! this!*"—she struck her breast—"is my soul under a knife. Why did I sit still while she was talking and not tell her that he was *good—good*—as good a man as ever drew human breath? Why didn't I tell her what Pole Baker's wife told me about his carrying food at midnight on his shoulder (through the swamp, wet to his waist) to her and the children, when Pole was off on a spree—making her swear almost on a Bible that she never would tell? And why didn't I tell her what Mrs. Baker said about his sitting down on the children's bed when they were asleep and talking so beautifully about their futures,

## Pole Baker

and all the sadness of his own childhood and his anxiety to know who and what he was? What if he *did* meet that Minnie Wade, and she and he— *Oh, my God!*" She stood staring at her pale face in her mirror, and then tottered back to the bed and sank upon it, sitting erect, her tense hands clutching her knees, as if for support against some invisible torrent that was sweeping her away. "Dead—oh! and for *that* reason—he, Nelson Floyd!"

Suddenly a sound fell on her ears. She sprang to her feet, straining her hearing to catch a repetition of it, her eyes wide, the blood of new life bounding in her veins. There it was again, the soft, mellow, insistent call of the whippoorwill from down by the grape-arbor. For a moment she stood still, crying to herself with an inward voice that had no sound: "Alive! Alive! Alive!" Then blowing out her candle, she sprang to the door of her chamber, and opened it, and passed on to the outer one, that was never locked, and which opened on the front porch. But there, with her hand on the knob, she paused, clutching it tightly, but not turning the bolt. Alive; yes, alive, but why? how could it be unless—unless he had killed Jeff Wade? Ah, that was it—red-handed, and fleeing from the arm of the law of man and God, he had come to say good-bye. A memory of her past determination never to meet him clandestinely flashed through her brain, but it was like overhead lightning that touches nothing, only warns man of its power and dies away. She turned the bolt and passed out into the night, running, it seemed, almost with the dragging feet of one in a nightmare, towards the trysting-place.

## Pole Baker

"Ah, here you are!" Nelson Floyd stood in the door-way of the little arbor, his arms outstretched. She allowed him to catch her cold, bloodless hands and lead her to the rustic seat within.

They sat down together. She felt his strong arm encompass her but had not the strength or will to resist. He pressed his cheek down on her cold brow, then his lips, and clasped one of her hands with his big warm one. Still she could not put him off. It was like a perplexing dream. There was the horror, and yet here was vague reassurance that at once inspired hope and benumbed her.

"What's the matter, little girl?" he asked, tenderly. "I declare you are quivering all over."

She sat up. Pushing him back from her, and twisting her hand from his grasp, she looked straight into his eyes.

"Jeff Wade!" she gasped. "Jeff Wade!—have you—did you—"

"Oh, I *see*!" he laughed, awkwardly. "I might have known you would hear about that. But never mind, little girl, the whole of it was gossip—there was nothing in it!"

"You mean—oh, Nelson, you say that you and he did not—"

"Not a bit of it," he laughed again, mechanically. "Everybody in town this morning was declaring that Jeff Wade was going to kill me on sight, but it wasn't true. I haven't seen him to-day."

"Oh, Nelson, I heard that he'd actually killed you."

"Killed me? Oh, that's a good joke!" he laughed. "But you must promise me never again to pay any

## Pole Baker

attention to such stuff. The idea! Why, Cynthia, don't you know better than to believe everything that comes by word of mouth in this section? I'll bet somebody started that who really wanted me out of the way. I've got enemies, I know that."

She drew herself still farther from him, eying him half suspiciously through the darkness. Her lips were parted; she was getting her breath rapidly, like a feverish child.

"But he was mad at you, I know that. You need not tell me an untruth."

"A man is almost justifiable," he laughed, "when he wants to keep such dirty stuff from young, refined ears like yours. Let's not talk of it any more, little girl. Why spoil this delightful meeting with thoughts of such things? You have no idea how much I've wanted to see you."

"Then"—she put out her cold hand to the lattice-work and drew herself up—"why did you whistle for me? You said you'd—you'd call me if you—you really needed me badly."

"Well, that's what I did to-night, I assure you," he laughed. "I felt like I just *had* to see you and talk with you. You see, I knew this thing would finally get to you, and that you would worry and perhaps lose sleep over it. I knew when you saw me with a whole skin and solid bones that you'd—"

"You flattered yourself that I'd care! Huh, I see! I suppose I'd hate to see *any one* shot down in cold blood at a moment's notice like that."

He caught her hand and laughingly attempted to draw her to him again, but she remained leaning against the door-frame.

## Pole Baker

"You are not going to be mad at me," he said, pleadingly, "now, are you?"

"No, but I'm going into the house I told you I'd not meet you here after all the others have gone to bed, when you whistled as you would to your dog, and I want you to know I would not have come if I had not been over-excited. Good-night."

"Wait a moment. I really did want to see you particularly, Cynthia — to make an engagement. The young folks are all going over to Pine Grove next Sunday afternoon to attend meeting, and I want to take you in my new buggy behind my Kentucky horse."


"You couldn't wait till to-morrow to ask me," she said, interrogatively.

"No, I couldn't wait till to-morrow, for that long, slim 'sky-pilot' will run over before breakfast to ask you to go with him. I know that. But can I count on you?"

She hesitated for a moment, then she said, simply: "Yes, I'll go with you; but I shall leave you now. Good-night."

"Good-night, then. Well, I'll see you Sunday—I guess that will have to do."

## XI

LOYD sat on the bench for more than an hour after she had left him. His thoughts were of himself. He smoked two cigars moodily. The whole day was retracing its active steps before his eyes, from the moment he opened his ledger to do his morning's work till now that his naked soul stood shivering in the darkness before him. His thoughts bounded from one incident in his life to another, each leap ending in a shudder of discontent. Cynthia's dignified restraint, and the memory of her helpless, spasmodic leanings both to and from him, at once weighted him down and thrilled him. Yes, his almost uncontrollable passion was his chief fault. Would he ever be able to subdue it and reach his ideal of manhood? Throwing his cigar away, he rose to leave. His watch told him it was eleven.

He did not go towards the house and out at the gate, but took a nearer way through the orchard, reaching the rail-fence a hundred yards below Porter's house. He had just climbed over and was detaching himself from the detaining clutch of numerous blackberry briars, when he saw a head and pair of shoulders rise from a near-by fence-corner.

It was Pole Baker who advanced to him in astonishment.

## Pole Baker

"By gum!" Pole ejaculated. "I come as nigh as pease lettin' a pistol-shot fly at you. I was passin' an' heard some'n' in the orchard an' 'lowed it mought be somebody tryin' to rob Porter's sweet-potato bed, an', by the holy Moses, it was you!"

"Yes, it was me, Pole."

The farmer's slow glance left Floyd's face and swept critically along the fence to the white-posted gate in the distance.

"Huh!" he said, and was silent, his eyes roving on to the orchard, where his glance hovered in troubled perplexity.

"Yes, I went to see Miss Cynthia," Floyd explained, after a pause.

"Huh, you say you did! Well, I didn't see no light in the parlor when I passed jest now. I was particular to look, fer I've been everywhar to find you, an' Porter's was the last place. By gum! I didn't think a chap that had been kick'n' the clods o' the grave off'n 'im all day fer a woman scrape 'ud run straight to another gal before he knowed whether his hide was liable to remain solid or not."

"I wanted to see Miss Cynthia," Floyd said, "to ask her to go to bush-arbor meeting with me Sunday, and I didn't intend to let my affair with Jeff Wade interfere with it."

"Huh, that was it! an' that's why you are a-comin' out o' Nathan Porter's orchard at eleven o'clock at night, is it?"

Floyd gazed at his rough friend for an instant, just a touch of irritability in his manner as he made answer:

"Miss Cynthia and I were sitting in the grape-



## Pole Baker

arbor, behind the house. She only stayed a minute or two. I sat there a long time after she went in. I was smoking and was beastly tired."

"I see, I see!" Pole was slightly mollified, but was still to be heard from.

"Now, let me tell you some'n', Nelson," he pursued. "Thar hain't no flower that ever bloomed an' throwed out sweet smells that's as nice an' purty as a pure young gal that's got good, honorable parents, an' the reputation of a creature like that is more valuable in my sight than all the gold an' diamonds on earth."

"You certainly are right about that," Floyd agreed, coldly, for he was secretly resenting Pole's implied warning.

"Well, then," Baker said, even more sternly, "don't you climb out'n Nathan Porter's orchard at this time o' night ag'in, when thar's a gate with a latch an' hinges to it right before yore eyes. What ef you'd 'a' been seed by some tattlin' busybody? You hain't got no more right to run the risk—*the bare risk*, I say—o' castin' a stain on that little gal's name than I have to set fire to yore store an' burn it to the ground. The shack could be built up ag'in, but that fair name 'ud never be the same ag'in."

"You are thoroughly right, Pole," Floyd said, regretfully. "I can see it now. But I'm rather sorry to see you throw it at a feller quite so hard."

"I reckon I'm sorter upset," the farmer said, half apologetically, as they walked on. "I reckon it was my talk with Jeff Wade about his sister that got me started. That's mighty nigh broke him all to pieces, Nelson."

## Pole Baker

"So you met Wade!" Floyd said, quickly. "I thought perhaps you stopped him."

"You thought I did? What made you think I did?"

"Why, when I'd waited till about one o'clock," Floyd replied, "I started out to Wade's, and—"

"You say you started out thar?"

"Yes, I knew he meant business, and I wanted it settled, one way or the other, so that I could go back to work, or—"

"Or turn yore toes to the sky, you fool!"

"I started to say," Floyd went on, "that I knew something had interfered with his coming, and—"

"He'd 'a' shot seventeen holes in you or 'a' put seventeen balls in one!" Pole cried, in high disgust. "I finally fixed him all right, but he wasn't in no frame o' mind to have you come to his house an' rub it in on 'im. However, you hain't told me what made you think I stopped 'im."

"Why," said Floyd, "just as I was starting away from the spring, Mel Jones came running down the hill. He'd been hiding behind a big rock up there to see the affair, and was awfully disappointed. He begged me to wait a little longer, and said he was sure Jeff would come on. Then he told me he saw you in the road near Wade's house, and I understood the whole thing. I guess I owe my life to you, Pole. It isn't worth much, but I'm glad to have it, and I'd rather owe you for it than any one I know. What did you say to Wade?"

"Oh, I told 'im all I knowed about that little frisky piece, and opened his eyes generally. It's all off, Nelson. He'll let you alone in the future. He's

## Pole Baker

badly broke up, but it's mostly over findin' out what the gal was."

They had reached the point where their ways separated, when they heard several pistol-shots on the mountain road not far away, and prolonged shouting.

"White Caps," said Pole, succinctly. "They're out on another rampage. Old Mrs. Snodgrass, by some hook or crook, generally gits on to the'r plans an' comes over an' reports it to Sally. They are on the'r way now to whip Sandy McHugh. They've got reliable proof that he stole Widow Henry's pigs, an' they are goin' to make 'im a proposition. They are a-goin' to give 'im his choice betwixt a sound whippin' an' reportin' the matter to the grand jury. They want him to take the lickin' so he kin stay on an' work fer his wife and childern. I reckon that's what he'll decide to do. Sandy ain't in no shape to go to the penitentiary."

"I guess he deserves punishment of some sort," said Floyd, abstractedly, "though it's a pity to have our society regulated by a band of mountain out-laws."

"They certainly set matters straight over at Darley," Pole said. "They broke up them nigger dives, an' made it safe fer white women to go to prayer-meetin' at night. Say, Nelson, I'm sorter sorry I spoke so hard back thar about that little gal's reputation, but the very thought o' the slightest harm ever comin' to her runs me wild. I never have spoke to you about it, but I tuck a deliberate oath once to protect 'er with my life, ef necessary. You see, she's been more than a friend to me. Last


## Pole Baker

winter, while I was off on one o' my benders, little Billy got sick. He had the croup an' come as nigh as pease dyin'; he could hardly breathe. It was a awful night, rainin', snowin', sleetin', an' blowin'. Sally left him long enough to run over to Porter's to beg somebody to run fer Dr. Stone, an' Cynthia come to the door an' promised it ud be done. She tried to git old Nathan up an' dressed, but he was so slow about it—grumblin' all the time about women bein' scared at nothin'—that Cynthia plunged out in the storm an' went them two miles herself, an' fetched the doctor jest in the nick o' time. Then she stayed thar the rest o' that night in 'er wet clothes, doin' ever'thing she could to help, holdin' Billy in her arms, an' rockin' 'im back an' forth, while I was—by God, Nelson Floyd, I was lyin' under the table in Asque's bar so drunk I didn't know my hat from a hole in the ground. An' when I heard all about it afterwards, I tuck my oath. I was in the stable feedin' my hoss; he heard all I said, Nelson, an' I'll be derved ef I don't believe he understood it. I'm here to say that ef anybody don't believe I'll put a ball in the man that dares to say one word agin that little angel, all he's got to do is to try it! This is a hell of a community fer idle talk, anyway, as you know from yore own experience, an' ef any of it ever touches that gal's fair name I'll kill tatlers as fast as they open the'r dirty mouths."

"That's the way to look at it, Pole," Nelson Floyd said, as he turned to go; "but you'll never have anything to fear in that direction. Good-night."

"Good-night, Nelson. I'll see you in the mornin'. I ought to 'a' been in bed two hours ago."

## XII

ELL, I hear that Sandy McHugh tuck his whippin' like a little man last night," Pole remarked to Captain Duncan and Floyd the next morning at the store. "They say he made strong promises to reform, an', gentlemen, I'm here to tell you that I believe them White Caps are doin' a purty good work. The lickin' Sandy got last night from his neighbors an' well-wishers towards him an' his family is a-goin' to work a bigger change in him than a long trial at court at the state's expense."

"Well, they say he confessed to the stealing," said the planter. "And a thing like that certainly ought to be punished in some way."

"I never stold but once in my life," Baker laughed, reminiscently, "an' I was sorter drawn into that. I was goin' with a Tennessee drover down to Atlanta with a car o' hosses. Old Uncle Abner Daniel was along, an' me'n him always was sorter thick. We come to Big Shanty, whar the conductor told us we'd barely have time to run out to the side o' the road an' buy a snack to eat, an' me'n Uncle Ab made a dash fer the lunch-counter, run by a bald-headed Dutchman with a bay-window on 'im. Thar was a pile o' sandwiches on the counter marked ten cents apiece, an' we bought two. I noticed Uncle Ab

## Pole Baker

sorter twist his face around when he looked in his'n, an' then I seed that the ham inside of 'em both wasn't any thicker 'n a piece o' paper.

"'Look here, Pole' said Uncle Ab, 'I bought a *sandwich*; I didn't agree to pay that fat thief ten cents o' my hard money fer two pieces o' bread that don't even smell o' meat.'

"'Well, what you goin' to do about it?' says I.

"'Do about it?' says he, an' then he sorter winked, an' as the Dutchman had turned to his stove whar he was fryin' some eggs, Uncle Ab stuck out his long fingers an slid a slice o' ham out o' the top sandwich in the stack an' slyly laid it betwixt his bread. I deprived the one under it of all the substance it held, an' me 'n Uncle Ab was munchin' away when two passengers, a big man an' a little, sawed-off one, run up jest as the whistle blowed. They throwed down the'r dimes an' grabbed the two top sandwiches, an' we all made a break fer the train an' got in together. The fellers set right behind me 'n Uncle Ab, an' when they begun to eat you never heard sech cussin'. 'Damn it, thar hain't a bit o' ham in mine!' the big feller said; an' then the little 'un ripped out an oath, an' reached up an' tried to git at the bell-cord. 'The damn pot-gutted thief didn't even *grease* mine,' he said, an' they both raised windows an' looked back an' shook the'r fists an' swore they'd kill that Dutchman the next time they seed 'im.

"I thought I'd actually die laughin'. Uncle Ab set thar with the straightest face you ever looked at, but his eyes was twinklin' like stars peepin' through wet clouds.

## Pole Baker

"Finally he said, 'Pole,' said he, 'this experience ort to teach us a lesson. You cayn't down wrong with wrong. We started in to beat that swindler at his game, an' ended up by robbin' two hungry an' honest wayfarers.'"

Floyd and Captain Duncan laughed. It seemed that there was a disposition on the part of both Pole and the planter not to allude to the unpleasant affair of the preceding day, though Floyd, in his sensitive attitude in regard to it, more than once fancied it was in their minds.

"There is a personal matter, Floyd," said Duncan, after a silence of several minutes, "that I have been wanting to speak to you about. It is in regard to your parentage. I've heard that you are greatly interested in it and would like to have it cleared up."

"I confess it, captain," Floyd said. "I suppose that is a feeling that would be natural to any one placed as I am."

"Most decidedly," Duncan agreed. "And it is my opinion that when you do discover what you are looking for, it will all seem so simple and plain that you will wonder how you could have missed it so long. I don't think it is possible for a thing like that to remain hidden always."

"It certainly has foiled me, captain," Floyd replied. "I have spent more money and made more effort than you would dream of, but met with disappointment on every hand."

"Perhaps you didn't look close enough at home," said Duncan. "I confess the thing has interested me a good deal, and the more I see of you, and observe

## Pole Baker

your pluck and courage, the more I would like to see you discover what you want."

"Thank you, captain," Floyd said, earnestly.

"I'm going to confess something else, too," the planter went on, "now that I see you don't resent my interest. The truth is, I had a talk with Colonel Price about it. You know he understands more about genealogy and family histories than any man in the county. I asked him if he didn't think that your given name, 'Nelson,' might not tend to show that you were, in some way, related to a family by that name. Price agreed with me that it was likely, and then it flashed on me that I knew a man down in Atlanta by the name of Floyd—Henry A. Floyd—whose mother was one of the South Carolina Nelsons."

"Is it possible?" the young merchant asked, leaning forward in almost breathless interest.

"Yes, and he is a man of good standing, but very unsuccessful financially—a man who was educated for the law, and failed at it, and now, I believe, lives only on the income from a big farm in Bartow County. I knew him quite well when we were both young men; but he never married, and of late years he seems soured against everybody. I met him at the Capitol in Atlanta only last week, and tried to get him interested in your family matter. At first, from his evident surprise that there could be any one bearing both those names up here, I thought he was going to reveal something that would aid you. But after asking me three or four questions about you, he closed up, and that was the end of it. He said he knew nothing of your par-



## Pole Baker

entage, but that he was sure you were no kin of his."

"Say, captain"—Pole Baker broke into the conversation—"would you mind tellin' me right here what you told 'im about Nelson? I've seed the old cuss; I've been on his farm; I once thought about rentin' land from 'im. Did you tell 'im Nelson was a man of high standing here—that he was about the richest young chap in the county an' got more grit than a car-load o' sand-paper?"

"No," Duncan laughed. "He didn't let me get that far, Baker. In hopes of rousing his sympathy, I reckon I laid a good deal of stress on Floyd's early misfortune. Of course, I was going to tell him all about you, Floyd, but, as I say, he didn't give me a good chance."

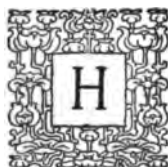
"You were quite right, captain," Floyd returned. "Pole would have made me appear ridiculous."

"Huh! I'd a got more out o' the old fossil than Captain Duncan did," Pole declared, positively, "You knowed how to manage men in the war, captain, an' you are purty good at bossin' an overseer when you are at a hotel in Florida an' he's fillin' a sack in yore corn-crib at home, but I'll bet my hat you didn't tackle that feller right. Knowing that he was down in the mouth, unlucky, an' generally soured agin the world, I'd never a-tryed to git 'im interested in pore kin he'd never seed. I'll bet a quart o' rye to two fingers o' sp'ilt cider that he'd 'a' talked out o' t'other side o' his mouth ef I'd a been thar to sorter show 'im the kind o' kin that he mought scrape up ef he turned his hand to it. You let me run agin that old skunk, an'

## Pole Baker

I'll have him settin' up the drinks an' axin' me more questions than a Dutchman l'arnin' to talk our language. Shucks! I'm jest a mountain-scrub, but I know human natur'. Thar comes old Mayhew. He'll order us out—it's treat, trade, or travel with that old skunk."

### XIII



HILLHOUSE had gone over to Porter's early that morning. He found Nathan seated on the porch in his shirt-sleeves, his heavy shoes unlaced for comfort and a hand-made cob-pipe in his mouth.

"I want to see Miss Cynthia a moment," the preacher said, with a touch of embarrassment as he came in at the gate, his hat in hand.

Old Porter rose with evident reluctance. "All right," he said. "I'll see ef I kin find 'er—ef I do it will be the fust time I ever run across her, or any other woman, when she was needed."

He returned in a moment "She'll be out in a few minutes," he said. "She told me to tell you to set down here on the porch."

Hillhouse took a vacant seat, holding his hat daintily on his sharp knees, and Porter resumed his chair, tilting it backward as he talked.

"Ef you are ever unlucky enough to git married, parson," he said, "you'll know more about women than you do now, an' at the same time you'll swear you know less. They say the Maker of us all has unlimited knowledge, but I'll be blamed ef I believe He could understand women—even ef he *did* create 'em. I'm done with the whole lot!" Porter waved his hand, as if brushing aside something of an ob-

## Pole Baker

jectionable nature. "They never do a thing that has common-sense in it. I believe they are plumb crazy when it comes to tacklin' anything reasonable. I'll give you a sample. Fer the last ten years I have noticed round about here, that whenever a man died the women folks he left sent straight to town an' bought a high-priced coffin to lay 'im away in. No matter whether the skunk had left a dollar to his name or not, that Jew undertaker over thar at Darley, to satisfy family pride, sent out a coffin an' trimmin's to the amount of an even hundred dollars. I've knowed widows an' orphans to stint an' starve an' go half naked fer ten years to pay off a debt like that. Now, as I'm financially shaped, I won't leave but powerful little, an' that one thing worried me considerable. Now an' then I'd sorter spring the subject on my women, an' I found out that they thought a big splurge like that was the only decent way to act over a man's remains. Think o' the plumb foolishness, parson, o' layin' a man away on a silk-plush cushion after he's dead, when he's slept all his life on a common tick stuffed with corn-shucks with the stubs on 'em. But that's *women!* Well, I set to work to try to beat 'em at the game, as fur as *I* was concerned. I 'lowed ef I made my preparations myself ahead o' time, with the clear understandin' that I wanted it that away, why, that no reasonable person would, or could, raise objections."

"Oh, I see!" Hillhouse said, his mind evidently on something else.

"Well, you may see—an' any other reasonable *man* could—but you don't see what them women done.

## Pole Baker

Well, to go on. I went down to Swinton's new mill, whar he was sawin' out pine planks, an' set around all mornin', an' whenever I seed a solid heart-plank run out, I'd nab it an' lay it aside. Then, when I'd got enough to make me a good, roomy box, I axed 'im what the pile was wuth an' got the lot at a bargain, beca'se times was dull an' I was on the spot. Well, I hauled the planks home on my wagon an' unloaded at the barn. The women, all three, come out like a lot o' hens peckin' around an' begun to ax questions. They 'lowed I was goin' to make some shelves fer the smoke-house, to lay hams an' shoulders on, an' they was powerful tickled. I didn't let 'em know right then. But the next day when Jim Long come with his hammer an' nails an' saw an' plane, an' stood me up agin the wall in the woodshed, an' started to measure me up an' down an' sideways, they begun to scream an' take on at a desperate rate. It was the fust time I ever heard mournin' at my own funeral, an' it sorter upset me; but I told Jim to go ahead, an' he did start, but, la me! The whole lay-out run to 'im an' got around 'im an' threatened, an' went on at sech a rate that he throwed up the job an' went home. I got mad an' went off fishin', an' when I come back I found all o' them fine, new planks split up into kindlin' fer the stove, an' it wasn't a week 'fore my burial outfit was turned into ashes. I kin see now that when my time comes my folks will rake an' scrape to git up money to put me in a box so thin that a dead man could kick a hole in it."

"They have their way of looking at such matters," the preacher ventured, awkwardly. "Death is a

## Pole Baker

serious thing, brother Porter, and it affects most people deeply."

"It hain't so serious on a cash basis as it is on a credit," Nathan declared. "But thar Cynthia comes now."

"I'm an early bird, Miss Cynthia." Hillhouse was actually flushed. "That is, I don't mean to hint that you are a worm, you know; but the truth is, I was afraid if I didn't come quick some hawk of a fellow would bear you away to bush-arbor meeting next Sunday afternoon. Will you let me take you?"

Cynthia's face clouded over. "I'm very sorry," she said, "but I have already promised some one else."

"Oh, is that so?" Hillhouse could not disguise his disappointment. "Are you going with—with—"

"Mr. Floyd asked me," the girl answered, "and I told him I'd go. I'm very sorry to disappoint you."

"Why, Cynthia"—Mrs. Porter had approached and stood in the door-way, staring perplexedly at her daughter—"you told me last night just before you went to bed that you had no engagement for Sunday. Have you had a note already this morning?"

Cynthia, in some confusion, avoided her mother's sharp, probing look.

"It doesn't matter," she said, lamely. "I've promised to go with Mr. Floyd, and that is sufficient."

"Oh yes, that is sufficient, of course," Hillhouse said, still under his cloud of disappointment, "and I hope you will have a pleasant time. The truth is, Floyd is hard to beat at anything. He has a way

## Pole Baker

about him that wins the—perhaps I may say—the sympathy of nearly all ladies.”

A reply of some sort was struggling for an outlet in Cynthia's rapidly rising and falling bosom, but her mother forestalled her with tight lips and eyes that were flashing ominously.

“Brother Hillhouse,” she said, “a man of that stamp has more influence over girls of the present generation than any other kind. Let a man be moral, religious, and sober, and thoughtful of the reputations of women, and he is shoved aside for the sort of men who fight duels and break hearts and ruin happy homes for their own idle gratification.”

“Oh, Mrs. Porter, I didn't mean to raise such a— a point as that,” Hillhouse stammered. “I'm sure Miss Cynthia appreciates all that is good in humanity; in fact, I think she leans decidedly that way. I couldn't expect her to let a little public gossip turn her against a friend whom she believes in.”

“Thank you, Mr. Hillhouse,” Cynthia said, drawing herself up to her full height and turning to go in. “I appreciate the way you look at it.”

She went into the house, walking very straight and not looking back.

Porter stood up and knocked the ashes from his pipe in his hard, broad hand. “Do you see that thar gate, parson?” he laughed. “Well, you take a fool's advice an' go home, an' come back some other time. Neither one o' them women know what they are a-talkin' about, an' they'll have you as crazy as they are in ten minutes ef you try to follow 'em.”

When Hillhouse had gone, Mrs. Porter went back

## Pole Baker

into the sitting-room and stood over Cynthia as the girl sat sewing at a window.

"You may *think* you've got my eyes closed," the old woman said, "but you haven't. You didn't have any engagement with Nelson Floyd last night at supper, and you either saw him after we went to bed or you have had a secret note from him this morning."

"Have it your own way," Cynthia said, indifferently, and hot with vexation she bent her head over her work.

"I was watching your face this morning, too," Mrs. Porter went on, "when your pa came in and said that Wade did not meet Floyd at the spring, and I noticed that you did not seem at all surprised. I'll get at the bottom of this, now you see if I don't!" And white with suppressed anger, Mrs. Porter turned away.

As she went out Mrs. Radcliffe, with a tottering step, came into the room and drew near to Cynthia.

"I am worried about your mother," she said, standing with her thin hand resting on the window-frame. She troubles so much over small things. I shudder when I think about it, Cynthia; but I'm afraid she'll go like your aunt did. It seems to be inherited from your grandfather's side of the family."

"Are you really afraid of that, granny?" The girl looked up, a serious expression dawning in her eyes.

"Well, I don't know as I think she'd actually kill herself, as Martha did, but if this goes on her mind certainly will give way. It's not natural—it's too



## Pole Baker

great a strain for one human brain to stand. She didn't sleep a wink last night I know that, for I woke up several times and heard her moving about and sighing."

"Poor mamma!" Cynthia said, regretfully, to herself, as her grandmother moved slowly from the room. "And I spoke disrespectfully to her just now. Besides, perhaps I have given her cause to worry, from her stand-point. God forgive me, I really *did* go out to meet him that way, and if she thinks it would be so bad, what must he think? Is it possible for him to class me with—to think of me as—as he does of— Oh!" and with a hot flush burning her face, Cynthia rose hastily and put her work away.

#### XIV



AT one o'clock the following Sunday afternoon Nelson Floyd drove up to Porter's gate in his new buggy, behind his spirited Kentucky thorough-bred. Nathan Porter in his stockinged feet, for the day was warm, stood on the porch, and as Floyd reined in, he walked down the steps and out to the gate, leaning over it lazily, his slow, pleased glance critically sweeping the horse from head to foot.

"You've got you a dandy at last," was his observation. "I used to be some'n' of a judge. Them's the slimmest legs fer sech a good stout body I ever seed. He totes his head high without a check-rein, too, an' that's purty. I reckon you come after Cynthia. She'll be out here in a minute. She knows you've come; she kin see the road from the window o' her room. An' I never knowed a woman that could keep from peepin' out."

"Oh, I'm in no hurry at all," Floyd assured him. "It's only ten miles, and we can easily make it by the three o'clock service."

"Oh, well, I reckon it don't make no odds to you whether you hold *yore* meetin' in that hug-me-tight or under the arbor. I know my choice 'ud 'a' been jest one way when I was on the turf. Camp-meet-

## Pole Baker

in's an' bush-arbor revivals used to be our hay-time. Us boys an' gals used to have a great way o' settin' in our buggies, jest outside, whar we could chat all we wanted to, jine in the tunes, an' at the same time git credit fer properly observin' the day."

"That's about the way the young people look at it now," Floyd said, with a smile.

"I reckon this is a sort o' picnic to you in more ways than one," Porter remarked, without a trace of humor in his tone, as he spat over the gate and wiped his chin on his bare hand. "You ort to enjoy a day o' freedom, after waitin' two hours at that spring fer Jeff Wade. Gee whiz! half o' Springtown was behind barracks, sayin' prayers an' beggin' the Lord to spare the town from flames. I didn't stay myself. I don't object to watchin' a fisticuff match once in a while, but fellers in a powder-and-ball battle like that seem to try to mow down spectators as hard as they do the'r man. Then I don't like to be questioned in court. A feller has to forgit so dern much, ef he stands to his friends."

"No, we avoided trouble," said Floyd, in evident aversion to a topic so keenly personal. "So you like my horse! He is really the best I could get at Louisville."

"I reckon." Porter spat again. "Well, as you say, Wade *will* shoot an' he kin, too. When he was in the war, they tell me his colonel wanted some sharpshooters an' selected 'im to—but thar's that gal now. Gee whiz! don't she ook fluffy?"

For the most part, the drive was through the mountains, along steep roads, past yawning gorges, and across rapid, turbulent streams. It was an

## Pole Baker

ideal afternoon for such an outing, and Cynthia had never looked so well, though she was evidently fatigued. Floyd remarked upon this, and she said:

"I don't know why it was, but I waked at three o'clock this morning, and could not get back to sleep before father called me at six. Since then I have been hard at work. I'm afraid I shall feel very tired before we get back."

"You must try not to think of fatigue." Floyd was admiring her color, her hair, her eyes. "Then you ought to relax yourself. There is no use sitting so erect; if you sit that way the jolting over this rough road will break you all to pieces. Don't lean so far from me. I'm not going to hurt you. I'm glad I beat Hillhouse to you. I saw him going to your house the next morning. I know he asked you."

"Yes, he asked me," Cynthia said, "and I was sorry to disappoint him."

Floyd laughed. "Well, the good and the bad are fighting over you, little girl. One man who, in the eyes of the community, stands for reckless badness, has singled you out, and thrown down the gauntlet to a man who represents the Church, God, and morality—both are grimly fighting for the prettiest human flower that ever grew on a mountain-side."

"I don't like to hear you talk that way." Cynthia looked him steadily in the eyes. "It sounds insincere; it doesn't come from your heart. I don't like your compliments—your open flattery. You say the same things to other girls."

"Oh no; I beg your pardon, but I don't. I couldn't. They don't inspire them as you do. You—you tantalize me, Cynthia; you drive me crazy

## Pole Baker

with your maddening reserve—the way you have of thinking things no man could read in your face, and above it all, through it all, your wonderful beauty absolutely startles me—makes me at times unable to speak, clogs my utterance, and fires my brain. I don't know—I can't understand it, but you are in my mind all day long, and at night, after my work is over, I want to wander about your house—not with the hope of having you actually come out, you know, but to enjoy the mere fancy that you have joined me.”

A reply was on her hesitating lips, but his ardor and impetuosity swept it away, and she sat with lowered lashes looking into her lap. The horse had paused to drink at a clear brook running across the road. All about grew graceful, drooping willows. It was a lonely spot, and it seemed that they were quite out of the view of all save themselves. Cynthia's pink hand lay like a shell in her lap, and he took it into his. For an instant it thrilled as if the spirit of resistance had suddenly waked in it, and then it lay passive. Floyd raised it to his lips and kissed it, once, twice, several times. He held it ecstatically in both his own, and fondled it. Then suddenly an exclamation of surprise escaped Cynthia's lips, and with her eyes glued on some object ahead, she snatched her hand away, her face hot with blushes. Following her glance, Floyd saw a man with his coat on his arm rising from the ground where he had been resting on the moss. It was Pole Baker, and with his shaggy head down, his heavy brows drawn together, he came towards them.

“I was jest waitin' fer somebody to pass an' give

## Pole Baker

me a match," he said to Floyd, almost coldly, without a glance at Cynthia. "I'm dyin' to smoke this cigar."

"What are you doing out afoot?" Floyd asked, as he gave him several matches.

"Oh, I'm goin' to meetin', too. I know a short foot-path through the mountains. Sally an' the children didn't want to come, an' I'd a heap ruther walk five miles than to ride ten over a road like this 'un. I'd sorter be afeard of a mettlesome hoss like that 'un. Ef he was to git scared an' break an' run, neither one o' you'd escape among these cliffs an' gullies."

"Oh, I can hold him in," Floyd said. "Well, we'd better drive on. Do you think you can get there as soon as we do, Pole?"


"I won't miss it much," said the farmer, and they saw him disappear in a shaded path leading down the mountain-side.

"He puzzles me," Floyd said, awkwardly. "For a minute I imagined he was offended at something."

"He saw you—holding my hand." Cynthia would not say *kissing*. The word had risen to her tongue, but she instinctively discarded it. "He's been almost like a brother to me. He has a strong character, and I admire him very much. I always forget his chief weakness; he never seems to me to be a drunkard. He has the highest respect for women of any man I ever knew. I'm sorry—just now—"

"Oh, never mind Pole," Floyd broke in, consolingly. "He's been a young man himself, and he knows how young people are. Now, if you begin to worry over that little thing, I shall be miserable. I set out to make you have a pleasant drive."

## XV

 AN hour later they arrived at the bush-harbor, a rough shed upon which rested a roof of freshly cut boughs of trees and in which there were benches without backs. The ground was strewn with straw, and at the far end was a crude platform and table where several ministers sat.

Leaving his companion near the main entrance, Floyd led his horse some distance away before he could find a suitable place to hitch him. Returning, he found a seat for himself and Cynthia near the rear. They had not been there long before Pole Baker slouched in, warm and flushed from his walk, and sat directly across the aisle from them. Floyd smiled and called Cynthia's attention to him, but Pole stared straight at the pulpit and neither looked to the right nor left. Floyd noticed a farmer bend over and speak to him, and was surprised to see that Pole made no response whatever. With a puzzled expression on his face, the farmer sank back into his seat.

The meeting was opened with prayer and a hymn. Then Hillhouse, who had arrived a little late, came in, a Bible and hymn-book in hand, and went forward and sat with the other ministers. Floyd noted the shifting look of dissatisfaction on his thin face, and

## Pole Baker

his absent-minded manner, as he exchanged perfunctory greetings with those around him.

"Poor fellow!" Floyd said to himself, "he's hard hit, and no wonder." He glanced at the fair face at his elbow and thrilled from head to foot. She was certainly all that a woman could possibly be.

Then there was a rousing sermon from the Rev. Edward Richardson, an eloquent mountain evangelist. His pleadings bore immediate fruit. Women began to shed tears, and sob, and utter prayers aloud. This was followed by tumultuous shouting, and the triumphant evangelist closed his talk by asking all who felt like it to kneel where they were and receive prayers for their benefit. Half of the congregation fell on their knees. "Did you see that?" Floyd whispered to Cynthia, and he directed her attention to Pole Baker, who was kneeling on the ground, his great, heavily shod feet under the seat in front of him, his elbows on his own bench, and his big, splaying hands pressed over his eyes.

"Poor fellow!" she whispered back, "he is making fresh resolutions to quit drinking, I suppose. I'm so sorry for him. He tries harder to reform for the sake of his wife and children than any man I know. Sometimes I am afraid he never will succeed."

"Perhaps not," said Floyd. "You see, I know what it is, Cynthia."

"You?"

"Why, of course, it almost got me down once. There was a point in my life when I could have been blown one way or the other as easily as a feather. I don't want to pose as being better than I am, and I confess that I am actually afraid at times that it



## Pole Baker

may again get the best of me. God only knows how a man has to fight a thing like that after it has once become a habit. As long as matters are like they are now, I can hold my own, I am sure; but I actually believe if I had to meet some absolutely crushing blow to all my hopes and aspirations, I'd—I'd really be as weak as Pole is."

"I don't believe it," said Cynthia, raising her frank eyes to his. "I don't believe a word of it," she repeated, firmly.

"You don't? Well, perhaps your faith will save me."

The prayer over, the preacher next called on all who felt that they needed special spiritual help in any particular trial, affliction, or trouble to come forward and give him their hands. Several men and women responded, and among them, to Floyd's growing astonishment, was Pole Baker. He stood erect at his seat for an instant, and then, with his long arms swinging at his sides, he walked up and shook hands stiffly with the minister.

"You were right about it," Floyd said to Cynthia. "I reckon he's making new resolutions. But where is the fellow going?"

They saw Pole, after releasing the preacher's hand, turn out at the side of the arbor, and slowly stalk away towards the spot where Floyd had hitched his horse.

"Perhaps he's going to start back home," Cynthia said. "It's getting late and cloudy, and he has a long walk before him."

"That's it," said Floyd. "And footing it through the woods as dark as it is even now is no simple

## Pole Baker

matter; though Pole really has the instincts of a red Indian. But I don't understand it, for he is not headed towards home."

There was another earnest talk from another preacher, and then Hillhouse closed the meeting with a prayer.

Leaving Cynthia at the arbor, Floyd went down for his horse. He was not far from the buggy when he saw Pole Baker rise from a flat stone upon which he had been seated. Without looking at him, Pole went to the hitch-rein and unfastened it, and led the restive animal around in the direction he was to go.

"Much obliged to you, old man," Floyd said, deeply touched by the action. "I could have done that myself."

"I know it, Nelson," Pole responded; "but I've got some'n' to say to you, an' as it is late an' may take a minute or two, I thought I'd save all the time I could an' not keep yore little partner waitin'."

"Oh, you want to see me, do you?"

Pole hesitated, his glance on the ground; the sockets of his big eyes were full-looking, and the muscles of his face and great neck were twitching. Presently he stared Floyd steadily in the eyes and began:

"Nelson, you've knowed me a good many years in the way one man knows a friend an' neighbor, or even a brother, but you don't plumb understand me yit. The Lord God Almighty's made men side by side in life as different as two kinds o' plants, or two sorts o' minerals. Me 'n' you is friends, an' I'm a-goin' to say at the start that I love you as a brother, but we see things different—me 'n' you do—we act

## Pole Baker

different about some things. That's what I want to see you about."

"Oh, I see!" Floyd had never been more perplexed in his life, but he waited for Pole's explanation.

"I hain't here to reflect on the character of women in general, nuther," said Baker, "though what I say mought sound like it to the shallow-minded. I'm here to tell you that the Lord God has made some o' the sweetest an' best an' purest women that ever lived unable to resist the fire the devil kindles in some men's eyes. Jest as the Almighty allowed Old Nick to play smash right among the elected angels o' heaven tell he was kicked out, so does he let 'im play hell an' damnation with the best an' purest here on earth, usin' as his devilish instrument men who excuse the'r selves on the plea that it's human natur'. A good woman will sometimes be as helpless under a hot-blooded man's eye and voice as a dove is when it flutters an' stands wonderin' before a rattlesnake that means to devour it soul and body."

"Pole, what's all this mean?" Floyd asked, slightly irritated.

"You wait an' see, dern yore hide!" said Pole. "Ef I kin afford to talk to you when I'm due at my home an' fireside, you kin afford to listen, fer ef it don't do you some good, it will be the beginnin' o' more harm than you ever had to tackle in yore short life. I want to tell you, Nelson, that that little woman you drove out here has been as true a friend to me as *you* have, an' if I have to side with one or the other, it will be with the weakest one.

## Pole Baker

She's made sacrifices fer me. She saved little Billy's life, an' one day while I was lyin' too drunk to hold my head up in the swamp betwixt her daddy's house an' mine, she found me thar an' run an' fetched fresh water in my hat, an' bathed my nasty, bloated face with her wet handkerchief, an' kept tellin' me to brace up an' not go home that away an' make my wife feel bad. She done that, Nelson Floyd, *an', by the holy God*, ef you think I'm a-goin' to set idle an' even *think* thar's a bare *resk* o' her bein' made unhappy by a big, strappin' thing in pants, an' a vest, an' coat, an' a blue neck tie, you've got little enough sense to need a guardeen to look after yore effects. I don't say thar *is* danger nor thar hain't, but I seed you doin' a thing back thar on the road that didn't strike me as bein' plumb right, coupled with what I seed when you climbed over the fence o' Nathan Porter's orchard nigh midnight not long back. I've already told you I love you like a brother, but while meetin' was goin' on I made up my mind to say this to you. I got down at the preacher's invite an' prayed on it, an' I went forward an' give 'im my hand on it, axin' the sanction o' the Lord on it, an' I'm here to tell you to yore teeth, Nelson, that ef a hair o' that bonny head is harmed *through you* I will kill you as I would a p'ison snake! Now, I've said it. I'd 'a' had to say it ef you had been my twin brother, an' I'm not a-goin' to be sorry fer it, nuther. Yore a good, well-meanin' young man, but you ain't yorese'f when you give way to hot blood."

Floyd was standing behind the neck of his horse, and for an instant Pole could not see his face. There

## Pole Baker

was silence for a moment. Then Floyd came round the horse and stood facing the mountaineer. He was pale, his lower lip was twitching; there was a look in his eyes Baker had never seen there before.


"Pole," he said, "I'd shoot any other man on God's earth for talking to me as you have.

"You mean you'd *try*, Nelson."

"Yes, I mean I'd try; but I can't be mad at you. We've been too close for that, Pole. I admire you more than any man alive. With all your faults, you have done more, in the long run, to lift me up than any other influence. I don't know what to say to you. I—I feel your words keenly, but you understand that I cannot, after what you have said, and the way you've said it, make promises. That would really be—be an insult to—to the lady in question, and an acknowledgment that no brave man could make to another."

"I understand that, Nelson." And Pole, with a softened face, held out his big, warm hand. "Shake, old boy. Let it all pass. Now that you understand me, I'm goin' to trust you like a friend. No good man will harm the sister of a friend, noway, an' that's what she is to me. She's my little sister, Nelson. Now, you go take 'er home. I don't like the looks o' that cloud in the west, an' I don't like the way that hoss o' your'n keeps layin' back his ears an' snortin' at ever' leaf that blows by."

## XVI

LOYD drove on to the bush-arbor and helped Cynthia into the buggy. "Was that Pole Baker talking to you?" she questioned. "Yes, he wanted to speak to me," said Floyd, seriously. "He unhitched my horse and turned him around."

"I suppose he is making resolutions to reform?"

Floyd shrugged his shoulders unconsciously. "Yes, he's always doing that sort of thing. He's afraid there may be a storm, too. He's the best weather prophet I know. If the cloud were behind us I shouldn't be concerned at all, for Jack could outrun it."

They were driving into a lonely, shaded part of the road, and there they noticed more plainly the darkness that had rapidly fallen over the landscape. Cynthia shivered, and Floyd tried to see the expression of her face, but she was looking down and he was unable to do so.

"Are you really afraid?" he asked.

"I was thinking about how narrow the road is," she made answer, "and of the awful cliffs along beside it. Then Jack seems restless and excited. If the lightning were to begin to flash, or should strike near us, he might—"

## Pole Baker

"Don't worry," Floyd broke in, calmly. "It is this long, dark road that makes you nervous. We'll get out of it in a few minutes."

But they were delayed. Jack, frightened at some imaginary object ahead, paused, and with his fore-feet firmly planted in front of him, he stood snorting, his ears thrown back. His master gently urged him to go on, but he refused to move. Then Floyd touched his flanks with the lash of the whip, but this only caused the animal to rear up in a dangerous manner and start to turn round. The road was too narrow for this, however, and throwing the reins into Cynthia's lap, Floyd got out and went to the horse's head, and holding to the bridle, he gently stroked the face and neck of the animal. But although Floyd tried, Jack would not be led forward. The situation was really grave, for the time was passing and night was already upon them. From his position at the animal's head, Floyd could barely see Cynthia in her white shawl and dress. Along the black horizon the lightning was playing, and the rising wind bore to their faces fine drops of rain. It was a sudden crash of thunder behind them that made the horse start forward, and it was with some difficulty that Floyd got into the buggy from behind. Then they dashed forward at a perilous speed. On they went, over the rough road. Even out in the open it was now dark, and in the distance they heard the ominous roar and crash of the approaching storm. The situation was indeed critical. Once more they ran into a road so dark that they could scarcely see Jack's head. Suddenly Floyd drew rein, stopped the quivering horse,

## Pole Baker

and looked closely at the ground. Cynthia heard an exclamation of dismay escape his lips.

"What is it?" she asked. He made no answer till she had repeated her question.

"This is the same road we passed over half an hour ago," he said. "We have gone the wrong way. We are lost, little girl!"

Even at that grave moment he felt a thrill of admiration at her coolness.

"Well," she said, "we must make the best of it and not get excited. If we lose our heads there is no telling what may happen."

"What a brave little woman you are!" he said. "Do you remember? The road forks about a quarter of a mile ahead; when we went by just now, we took either the right or the left, but I've forgotten which."

"We took the right," she said. "I remember that distinctly."

"Then we must take the left this time—that is, if you are sure."

"I'm very sure,"

"Good; then we must drive on as fast as we can."

"You'd better go slowly," Cynthia cautioned him. "The road is very, very dangerous, and if Jack should become frightened as we are passing a cliff there is no telling what—"

She did not finish, for there was a bright flash of lightning in their faces, followed by a deafening clap of thunder on the mountain-side above them. With a terrified snort, Jack plunged onward. They reached the point where the roads divided, and



## Pole Baker

Floyd managed to pull the animal into the right one. For half an hour they sped onward. Every effort Floyd made to check the horse was foiled; the spirited animal seemed to have taken the bit between his teeth. Then the storm broke upon them in alarming fury, and they suddenly found themselves before a high, isolated building. The horse, as with almost human instinct, had paused.

"It's Long's mill," Floyd told Cynthia. "It's not in use. Pole and I stopped here to rest when we were out hunting last month. The door is not locked. There is a shed and stable behind for horses. We must get in out of danger."

Cynthia hesitated. "Is it the only thing?" she asked.

"Yes, it might cost us our lives to drive on, and it is two miles to the nearest house."

"All right, then." He was already on the ground, and she put her hands on his shoulders and sprang down.

"Now, run up the steps," he said. "The door opens easily. I'll lead Jack around to the shed and be back in a minute."

She obeyed, and when he returned after a few moments he found her on the threshold waiting for him, her beautiful, long hair blown loose by the fierce wind.

They stood side by side in the darkness for a few minutes, and then a torrent of rain dashed down upon the roof like tons of solid matter, which threatened to crush the building like an egg-shell. He pushed her back, and with a great effort managed to close the big sliding-door.

## Pole Baker

"We must keep the wind out," he said. "If we don't the mill will be blown away."

It was now too dark for them to see each other at all, and the roar of the storm rendered speech between them almost impossible. She suddenly felt his hands grasp hers, and then he shouted, as he held them in his tight clasp: "There is a big pile of fodder over there against the wall. Come, sit down. There is no telling how long this may last, and you are already fagged out."

She offered no resistance, and he cautiously led her through the darkness till he felt the fodder under his feet. Then he bent down and raked a quantity of it together and again took her hand.

"Sit here," he said, gently pushing her downward. "It is dry and warm."

He was right. The soft bed of sweet-smelling corn leaves felt very comfortable to the tired girl. He laughed out impulsively as he pulled a quantity of the fodder near to her and sat down on it, locking his arms over his knees. "This isn't so very bad, after all," he said. "You know, it might have been a great deal worse. Jack's well housed, and this old mill has withstood a thousand storms."

She said nothing, and he leaned nearer till his lips almost touched her ear.

"Why are you so silent?" he asked. "Are you still afraid?"

"No, but I was wondering what my mother will think," Cynthia said. "She'll be sure we have been killed."

"Don't worry about that," Floyd said, cheerfully. "I gave Pole my last match, or I'd take a smoke."

## Pole Baker

Why, Cynthia, you don't know when you are in luck. I feel like Providence is good to me. I've not really had you much to myself all the afternoon, anyway, along with the tiresome preaching, singing, shouting, and the fast riding in the dark, and now—" He reached out and took her hand. She made an effort to withdraw it, but he laughed and held it firmly.

"Don't be afraid of me, dear," he said. And then, as in a flash, a picture stood before him. He saw Pole Baker at his rough bench kneeling in the straw. He had another vision. It was the gaunt farmer as he stalked forward to shake hands with the preacher. Then Floyd, as it were, stood facing the mountaineer, and, above the thunder of the raging tempest without, Pole's grim warning broke upon the ears of his soul. Floyd sat staring into the darkness. He saw a white dove fluttering in a grassy spot before a coiled snake, with eyes like living diamonds. A shudder passed over him, and raising Cynthia's hand to his lips he kissed it lightly, respectfully, and released it.

"Perhaps you'd rather have me stay near the door, little girl," he said, in a tone he had never used to her before. "You were thrown here with me against your will, and I shall not force my attentions upon you. Don't be afraid. I'm going to the door and sit down. I can see the road from there, and as soon as the storm is over I'll come for you."

She made no response, and, rising, he moved away, taking an armful of the corn-blades with him. He found a place against the wall, near the door, and

## Pole Baker

throwing the fodder down he rested upon it, his long legs stretched out upon the floor.

"Thank God!" he said. "Pole Baker has shot more manhood into my dirty carcass to-day than it ever held before. I'll take care of your little sister, Pole. She's a sweet, dear, noble, brave little woman. There is not another such a one on earth. Good God! what must a sensitive, refined creature like she is think of an affair like that Jeff Wade business?"

He shuddered. Pushing some of the fodder under his head, he reclined at full length. Something Pole had said to him once while they were on the river-bank fishing came to him. "I believe," the mountaineer had said, with his eyes on his line, "that the Almighty made women weak in their very sweetness an' purity an' men strong in evil. An' He lets two of 'em come together in this life, an' stand side by side, an' ef the man is good enough, they will grow together an' work fer good an' perfect happiness. But ef he's evil, he kin put out his slimy arms an' draw her into his own cesspool like a water-moccasin coiled round a pond-lily. It is with the man to make or damn his chances of contentment in life, an' when he's soaked in evil he not only damns hisse'f but all he touches."

Floyd closed his eyes. His admiration for Pole Baker had never been so intense. For perhaps the first time in his life he felt the sting of the hot blood of shame in his face.

"I'll take care of your little sister, Pole," he said. "I'll do it—I'll do it!"

He closed his eyes. The storm was beating more steadily now. His thoughts became a delicious blur.

## Pole Baker

He was asleep. Several hours must have passed. He waked, sat up, and looked about him; it was not so dark now, and while it was still raining, the noise of the falling drops was not so loud. He stood up and stretched himself. From the stiffness of his limbs he knew he had slept a long time.

"Cynthia!" he called out, but there was no reply. "Cynthia!" he called again, but still only his own voice rang out above the falling rain and whistling wind. He groped forward. In the darkness he saw her white dress like a drift of snow against the pile of fodder. He bent over her and touched her. She sat up with a start.

"You've been asleep, too," he laughed.

"Oh, have I?" she exclaimed. "I—I—forgot where I was, and I was so tired. Is—is the rain over? Can we go on now?"

"Not yet, I'm afraid, Cynthia," he said, consolingly. "If you don't object to staying here alone, I'll go outside and look around. I want to see if we can cross the mill creek. Sometimes it gets very high."

"Oh, I'm not afraid," she assured him. "There's nothing here to be afraid of."

"Some women would imagine the mill was full of tramps or escaped negro convicts," he laughed, "but you are different, little girl. You are plucky. I'll be back in a few minutes."

He returned very soon, stamping his wet boots on the mill steps. "The rain is about over," he told her. "The sky in the east is clearing up; in fact, it is almost daybreak. Cynthia, we have both slept longer than we had any idea of. But the worst part of the business is that the creek is out of

## Pole Baker

its banks and we can't get across till it runs down; but that won't take long. We can start for home about sunrise, and then we can go like the wind. Jack will want his breakfast."

She said nothing, but he fancied he heard her sigh. She started to rise and he put out his hand. She gave him hers with a strange, new show of confidence that touched him, thrilled him, and sent a flush of vague gratification over him.

"You are disappointed," he said, tentatively.

With her hand still in his they walked to the door and looked out towards the pale sky in the east.

"I was wondering what my mother will think," she said. "She won't like this at all. But you know, Nel—you know, Mr. Floyd, that I couldn't help it."

"Of course not," he said, frowning darkly. "Stopping here really saved our lives. She'll have to see that. You can make her see it, Cynthia."

"She's very peculiar," Cynthia sighed. "The smallest things almost drive her insane. The rain is over; don't you think we could go some other way and avoid the creek?"

"Why, yes, we could drive back to the Hillcrest road, but it would take two hours longer."

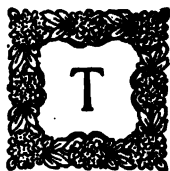
"Well, we would have to wait here that long wouldn't we?"

"Yes, it's six of one and half a dozen of the other," he smiled. "If you'd rather be in the buggy and on the move, why, we can start."

"I think I had," she said.

"All right; you are the doctor," he laughed. "I'll get Jack out and have him hitched to the buggy in a minute."

## XVII



HE sun—and it had never seemed to shine so brightly before—had been up about half an hour when the couple drove up to Porter's gate.

"There's mother at the window now," Cynthia said, as she got out of the buggy. "I can see that she's angry even from here."

"I'll hitch Jack and go in and explain," offered Floyd.

"Oh no, don't!" Cynthia said, quickly. "I'll tell her all about it. Go on. Good-bye."

"Good-bye, then," Floyd said, and he drove on to the village.

But Mrs. Porter did not come to the door to meet her as Cynthia expected. The girl found her alone in the sitting-room seated sulkily at the fireplace, where a few sticks of damp wood were burning gloomily."

"Well, where did you spend the night?" the old woman asked, icily.

Cynthia stood before her, withered to her soul by the tone in which her mother's question had been asked.

"You are not going to like it a bit, mother," the girl said, resignedly. "The storm overtook us just as we got to Long's mill. The horse was frightened

## Pole Baker

and about to run away and the road was awfully dangerous. There was nothing for us to do but to go in."

"Long's mill! Oh, my God! there is no one living there, nor in miles of it!"

"I know it, mother."

Mrs. Floyd buried her pale, wrinkled face in her hands and leaned forward in her chair, her sharp elbows on her knees.

"I'm never going to get over this!" she groaned—"never—never; and you are my *only* child!"

"Mother!" Cynthia bent down and almost with anger drew the old woman's hand from her face. "Do you know what you are saying? Do you know that—that you may drive me from home with that insinuation?"

Mrs. Porter groaned. She got up stiffly, and, like a mechanical thing moved by springs, she caught her daughter's wrist and led her to a window, sternly staring at her from her great, sunken eyes. "Do you mean to tell me that you and *that* man sat together all the live-long night in that mill?"

"Mother, I was completely tired out. There was some fodder on the floor. I sat down on it, and after a long time I dropped asleep. He did too. He was near the door, and I—"

Mrs. Porter extended the stiff fingers of her hand and plucked a piece of fodder from Cynthia's hair, and held it sneeringly up to the light. "It's a pity you didn't have a comb and brush with you," she said. "You'd have been supplied at a hotel. Your hair is all in a mess. I'm going to keep this little



## Pole Baker

thing. Light as it is, it has knocked life and hope out of me."

Cynthia looked at her steadily for a moment, and then turned from the room. "I'm not going to defend myself against such suspicions as you have," she said from the door. "I know what I am, if you don't."

"I reckon this whole county will know what you are before many days," snarled Mrs. Porter. "Minnie Wade had somebody in her family with enough manhood in 'im to want to defend her honor, but you haven't. Your sleepy-headed old father—"

The girl was gone. For several minutes the old woman stood quivering in the warm sunlight at the window, and then she stalked calmly through the dining-room and kitchen and out to the barn. One of the stable-doors was open, and she could see her husband inside.

"Nathan Porter!" she called out—"you come here. I've got something to tell you."

"All right," he answered. "I'll be thar in a minute. Dern yore lazy soul, hain't I give you enough corn to eat without you havin' to chaw up a brand-new trough? I'm a good mind to take this curry-comb an' bust yore old head with it!"

"Nathan Porter, I say, come out here! Let that horse alone!"

"All right, I'm a-comin'. Now, I reckon I'll have to fetch a hammer an' saw an' nails an' buy planks to make another trough, jest fer you to chaw up into powder."

"Nathan Porter, do you hear me?"

"Well, I reckon ef I don't, they do over at

## Pole Baker

Baker's," and the farmer, bareheaded and without his coat, came from the stable.

"That blasted hoss has deliberately set to work an' chaw—"

"Nathan Porter"—the old woman thrust her slim fingers into his face—"do you see that piece of fodder?"

"Yes, I see it. Is it a sample o' last year's crop? Are you buyin' or sellin'? You mought 'a' fetched a bundle of it. A tiny scrap like—"

"I got that out o' Cynthia's hair."

"You don't say! It must be a new sort o' ornament! I wouldn't be surprised to see a woman with a bundle of it under each arm on the front bench at meetin' after seein' them Wilson gals t'other night ready fer the dance with flour in the'r hair an' the ace o' spades pasted on the'r cheeks."

"Cynthia and Nelson Floyd stayed all night in Long's mill," panted Mrs. Porter. "There wasn't another soul there nor in miles of it."

"Huh, you don't say!" the farmer sniffed. "I reckon ef they had 'a' sent out a proclamation through the country that they was goin' to stay thar a lot o' folks would 'a' waded through the storm to be present."

"I got this out of her hair, I tell you!" the old woman went on, fiercely. "Her head was all messed up, and so was her dress. If you've got any manhood in you, you'll go to town and call Nelson Floyd out and settle this thing."

"Huh! Me go to his store on his busiest day an' ax 'im about a piece o' fodder no bigger 'n a gnat's wing? He'd tell me I was a dern fool, an' I'd deserve it. Oh, I see what you are a-drivin' at, an'

## Pole Baker

I tell you it gits me out o' patience. You women are so dad blasted suspicious an' guilty at the bottom yorese'ves that you imagine bad acts is as plentiful as the leaves on the ground in the fall. Now, let me tell you, you hain't obeying the Scriptural injunction to judge not lest ye be judged accordingly. I want you to let that little gal an' her sweetheart business alone. You hain't a - runnin' it. You don't have to live with the feller she picks out, an' you hain't no say whatever in the matter. Nur you h'aint got no say, nuther, as to the way she does her particular courtin'. The Lord knows, nobody was kind enough to put in away back thar when you was makin' sech a dead set fer me. Folks talk a little about Floyd, but let me tell you my *own* character them days wasn't as white as snow. I don't know many men wuth the'r salt that hain't met temptation. I sorter cut a wide swath 'fore I left the turf, an' you know it. Didn't I hear you say once that you reckoned you never would 'a' tuck me ef I'd 'a' been after you day an' night? You knowed thar was other fish in the sea, an' you didn't have any bait to speak of, with them Turner gals an' the'r nigger slaves an' plantations in the'r own right livin' next door to pa's. Yore old daddy said out open that you an' yore sister needn't expect a dollar from him; he'd educated you, an' that was all he could do. I hain't grumblin', mind you. I never cry over spilt milk; it hain't sensible. It don't help a body out of a bad matter into a better one."

"Oh, I wish you'd hush and listen to me." Mrs. Porter had not heard half he had said. "I tell you

## Pole Baker

Cynthia and that man stayed all night long in that lonely mill together, an' she came home at sunrise this morning all rumpled up and—"

"Now, you stop right thar! *You stop right thar!*" Porter said, with as much sternness as he could command. "As to stayin' in that mill all by the'rse'ves, I want you jest to put on yore thinkin'-cap, ef the old thing hain't wore clean to tatters or laid away till it's moth-et. Do you remember when that lonely old widder Pelham pegged out durin' our courtin'-time? You do? *Well!* We went thar—you an' me did—expectin' to meet the Trabue crowd, an' that passle o' young folks from Hanson's, to set up with the corpse. Well, when me 'n' you got thar about eight o'clock the Trabue crowd sent word that as long as the Hanson lay-out was comin', they believed they wouldn't drive so fur; an' right on top o' that come a message from the Hanson folks, sayin' that you an' me an' the Trabues was as many as the little house would hold, so they would stay away; an' thar you an' me was with nobody to make us behave but a dead woman, an' *her* screwed down tight in a box. I remember as clear as day that you laughed an' said you didn't care, an' you set in to makin' coffee an' cookin' eggs an' one thing another to keep us awake an' make me think you was handy about a house. Well, now, here's the moral to that tale. The neighbors—tough as my record was—was kind enough not to say nasty things about us afterwards, an' it hain't Christian or motherly of you to start a tale about our gal when as big a storm as that driv' her an' her beau in out o' danger. Besides, I tell you, you are

## Pole Baker

standin' in Cynthia's light. She's got as good a right to the best in the land as anybody, an' I believe Nelson Floyd is goin' to git married sooner or later. He's had a chance to look over the field, an' I hope she'll suit 'im. I never made money by marryin', myself, an' I sorter like the idea o' my child gittin' a comfortable berth. That gal hain't no common person nohow. She'll show off a fine house as well as any woman in this state. She's got sense, an' a plenty of it; folks say she's like me."


"You don't know what you are talking about." Mrs. Porter was looking at the ground. Her hard face had softened; she was drawn perforce to words at her husband's view of the matter. His rebuke rang harshly in her ears. She turned towards the house and took several steps, then she looked back. "I pray God you are right, Nathan," she said. "Maybe all the worry I had through the night has made me unable to see the matter fairly."

"That's it!" said Porter, as he leaned on the fence; "and let me tell you, if you don't quit makin' so many mountains out o' mole-hills, an' worryin' at sech a rate, you'll go like yore sister Martha did. Try worryin' about *yorese'f* awhile; ef I thought as mean about my own child as you do I'd bother about the condition o' my soul."

With her head hanging low, Mrs. Porter walked slowly to the house. Her view was more charitable and clearer, though she was so constituted that she could not at once obey her inclination to apologize to her daughter.

"I'm actually afraid I'm losing my mind," she said. "I am acting exactly as Sister Martha did."

## XVIII

T was a warm morning on the first day of June. Pole Baker lay on the thick grass, near the door of the court-house, talking to Jim Carden, a little shoemaker from Darley.

"Didn't Nelson Floyd go in the court-house jest now?" Pole asked.

"Yes," said the shoemaker, in his high voice; "him an' Colonel Price was settin' here fer half an' hour 'fore you come, talkin' about a trade. Price is tryin' to sell 'im his plantation, an' that big house completely furnished. I'd rather see Floyd's eyes when he's on a trade than anything I ever looked at. They shine like twin stars. But I don't believe they'll trade. They are too far apart."

"This section is chock full o' keen men, from the highest to the lowest," remarked Pole. "Old settlers say that a long time ago seven Jews settled here, intendin' to git rich, an' that these mountain men got all they had, an' the Jews literally starved to death. Thar hain't been one in the county since."

"Our folks certainly are hard to down," said Carden. "Do you know that long, slim chap in front o' Floyd's store? That's one o' the Bowen boys, from Gilmer—I mean the feller at the covered wagon."

## Pole Baker

"Know 'im? I reckon I do," Pole laughed, "That's Alf Bowen. I had a round with 'im one day. It was in the fall o' the year, an' they was so busy at Mayhew & Floyd's that they pulled me into service. I'm a purty good salesman when I'm about half loaded. Well, Alf come in leadin' his little gal by the hand, an' said he wanted to fit 'er out in a cloak. Joe Peters hung to 'im fer half an' hour, but everything he'd show the feller was too high, or not good enough, an' Joe switched 'im off on me. Joe was afeard ef the skunk went out that some more that was with 'im would follow, an' *they* was buyin' a little, now an' then. Well, do you know, Jim, I made up my mind I'd sell that feller a cloak ef I had to do it below cost an' make up the difference myself. Old Uncle Abner Daniel was thar settin' on a nail-keg, a-spittin' an' a-chawin' an' pokin' fun at me. As I was passin' 'im he cocked his eye up an' said, said he: 'Pole, I'll bet you a segar you cayn't sell 'im.' 'Done,' said I. 'I'll go you,' an' I set to work in earnest. Alf had sorter intimated that six dollars was his cloak-limit, an' I drawed Joe Peters round behind a stack o' boxes, an' axed 'im ef we had anything as low as that. Joe said no, we didn't, but, said he, 'sometimes when we git short, we run into Glenn's store next door an' take out an' article on trial, an' ef we sell it, we git it at cost.' Well, I happened to know that Glenn had some cloaks in, so I went back to my customer an' told 'im that we had jest got in a box o' cloaks the day before, but they was in the cellar unopened, an' ef he'd wait a minute, I'd bust the box an' see ef thar was any low-priced cloaks in the lot. Bowen's

## Pole Baker

eyes sorter danced, an' he said he had plenty o' time. So I picked up a hammer an' run down in the cellar. I knocked at an empty box, an' kicked over a barrel or two, an' then scooted out at the back door an' round into Glenn's shebang. 'Sam,' said I, 'have you got a cloak that you kin let us have so we kin sell it at six dollars an' make any profit?' He studied a minute, an' then he said he 'lowed he had jest the thing, an' he went an' got one an' fetched it to me. 'This un,' said he, 'is all right except this little ripped place here under the arm, but any woman kin fix that in a minute. I kin let you have it, Pole, fer five-fifty.' Well, sir, I grabbed it an' darted back into our cellar, knocked once or twice more with the hammer, an' run up to Alf an' the gal. 'Here's one,' said I. 'It's an eight-dollar garment, but in drawin' it out o' the box jest now I ripped it a little, but any woman kin fix that in a minute. Now, bein' as it's *you*, Alf,' said I, 'an' we want yore trade, I'll make it to you at first cost without the freight from Baltimore. I kin give you this thing, Alf,' said I, fer six dollars.'

"Well, sir, I thought I had 'im, an' was winkin' at Uncle Ab, when Bowen sorter sniffed an' stuck his long finger through the hole. 'Shucks!' said he. 'Sam Glenn offered me that cloak fer four dollars an' a half two weeks ago. I could 'a' got it fer four, but I wouldn't have it. It's moth-et.'"

Carden threw himself back on the grass and laughed. "What the devil did you do?" he asked.

"Do? — nothin'. What could I do? I jest grinned an' acknowledged the corn. The joke was agin me. An' the funny part of it was the feller



## Pole Baker

was so dead in earnest he didn't see anything to laugh at. Ef I'd a-been in his place I'd 'a' hollered."

"Did you give Uncle Ab his cigar?" the shoemaker asked.

"I offered it to 'im, Jim, but he wouldn't take it. I axed 'im why. 'Beca'se,' said he, 'I was bettin' on a certainty.' 'How's that?' said I. 'Why,' said he, 'I seed Alf Bowen buy a cloak fer that gal at the fire sale over at Darley two weeks ago. He was just lookin' around to see ef he'd got bit.'"

Pole saw Floyd coming out of the court-house and went to him. "I understand you an' Price are on a deal," he said.

"Yes, but we are far apart," Floyd answered, pleasantly. "He offers me his entire two thousand acres and furnished house for twenty-five thousand. As I told him, Pole, I could draw the money out of other investments an' take the property, but I couldn't see profit in it above twenty thousand."

"It's wuth all he asks fer it," Pole said, wisely.

"I know it is, to any man who wants to live on it, but if I buy it, I'd have to hire a good man to manage it, and, altogether, I can't see my way to put more than twenty thousand in it. He's anxious to sell. He and his wife want to move to Atlanta, to be with their married daughter."

They were walking towards Floyd's store, and Pole paused in the street. "Are you busy right now, Nelson?" he asked, his face wearing a serious look.

"Not at all, Pole."

"Well, I've got some'n' to say to you, Nelson. I'm goin' to acknowledge that thar's one thing I've

## Pole Baker

wanted to do fer you more, by hunkey, than anything in the world. Nelson, I've always hoped that I'd run across some clew that 'ud eventually lead to you findin' out who yore kin are."

"That's good of you, Pole," responded Floyd, in a sincere tone. "It is a thing I am more interested in than anything else in the world." The young merchant laughed mechanically. "Pole, if the lowest-looking tramp you ever saw in your life were to come here, and I found out he was even a distant cousin of mine, I'd look on him with reverence. I'd fit him out in new clothes and give him money, and never want to lose sight of him. Why I feel that way I don't know, but it is planted deep down inside."

"I knew you felt that away," said Pole, "and, as I say, I want to help. Now, Nelson, all my life folks has said I was keen about tracin' things out. In my moonshinin' day, an' since then, in helpin' old Ab Daniel an' Alan Bishop in that timber deal, an' in one way an' another, I've always been good at readin' men an' the'r faces an' voices. Now, I reckon what Captain Duncan said that day about his talk with that feller Floyd—Henry A. Floyd—in Atlanta went in at one o' yore ears an' out at t'other, but it didn't with me. I've studied about that thing night an' day ever since, an' yesterday I had a talk with Duncan. I made 'im go over what him an' Floyd said, word fer word, an' I'm here to tell you that I want yore consent to see that old man myself. I've got to go down to the United States court to-morrow to see Judge Spence, about leniency in old Paxton's moonshine case, an' I'll have

## Pole Baker

time on my hands. I wish you'd consent to let me talk, in a roundabout way, of course, to that man Floyd. Captain Duncan made a big mistake in sayin' so much about yore bad luck in yore childhood an' nothin' about what you've since made of yourself. A man as pore as Floyd is, an' as proud, wouldn't care to rake up kin with a man like Duncan showed you to be. The captain had an idea that ef he got the old chap's pity up he'd find out what he wanted to know, but a man of that stripe don't pity no unfortunate man nor want to claim kin with 'im. From the way Duncan talked to me, I have an idea that old man was keepin' back some'n'."

Floyd was looking at his rough friend with eyes full of emotion. "I'd rather have you do a thing of that kind, Pole, than any man alive," he said. "And I can trust your judgment and tact, too. I confess I am not hopeful in that particular direction, but if you want to see the man, why, do it. I certainly appreciate your interest, and next time I hope you will not wait to ask my consent. I trust the whole matter to you."

"Well," the mountaineer smiled, "I may be away off in my calculations, and make nothin' by it, but I want to try my hand. Thar comes Colonel Price. I'll bet a new hat he'll come to yore offer before long. You jest keep a stiff upper lip, an' don't bring up the subject of yore own accord; he'll do the talkin'."

## XIX



WHEN he had finished his interview with Judge Spence in Atlanta the next day, Pole went to a drug-store and looked up the address of Henry A. Floyd in the city directory. The old bachelor lived on Peachtree Street, about half a mile from the Union Depot, in a rather antiquated story-and-a-half frame house, which must have been built before the Civil War. The once white paint on its outside had turned to a weather-beaten gray, and the old-fashioned blinds, originally bright green in color, had faded, and hung loosely on rusty hinges. There was a little lawn in front which stretched from the gateless iron fence to the low-floored veranda, but it held scarcely a tuft of grass, the ground being bare in some places and in others weed-grown. Pole went to the door and rang. He was kept waiting for several minutes before a middle-aged woman, evidently a servant of all work or house-keeper, appeared.

"Is Mr. Floyd about?" Pole asked, politely, doffing his slouch hat.

"He's back in the garden behind the house," the woman said. "If you'll wait here I'll go call him."

"All right, ma'am," Pole said. "I'll wait; I've got plenty o' time." She went away, and he sat

## Pole Baker

down on a rickety bench on the veranda, his hat still in his hands, his eyes on the passing carriages and street-cars.

Presently the owner of the house appeared round the corner. He was tall, clerical looking, ashy as to complexion, slightly bald, had sunken cheeks over which grew thin, iron-gray side-whiskers, and a despondent stoop.

"I'll have to git at that old skunk through his pocket," Pole reflected, as his keen eyes took in every detail of the man's make-up. "He looks like he's bothered about some'n', an' a man like that's hard to git pinned down; an' ef I don't git 'im interested, he'll kick me out o' this yard. I'll be derved ef he don't favor Nelson a little about the head an' eyes."

"How are you, Mr. Floyd?" Pole stood up and extended his hand. "Baker's my name, sir; from up the country. I was on yore farm in Bartow not long ago, an' I sorter liked the lay o' the land. Bein' as I was down here on business, anyhow, I 'lowed I'd drap in an' ax ef you had any part o' that place you'd care to rent. I've jest got two hosses, but I want to put in about thirty acres."

A slight touch of life seemed to struggle into the wan face of the old man for a moment.

"I've got just about that many acres unrented," he said. "The rest is all let out. You'd have good neighbors, Mr.—"

"Baker, sir—Pole Baker," the caller put in.

"And good fertile land, too, Mr. Baker. May I ask if you intend to rent on the part-crop plan or for cash?"

## Pole Baker

Pole's eyes twinkled as they rested on a pair of fine horses and glittering carriage that were passing. "Ef I rent *yore'n*, Mr. Floyd, I'll pay cash."

"Well, that certainly is the wisest plan, Mr. Baker." There was a still greater show of life in the old man's face; in fact, he almost smiled. "Come inside a minute. I've got a map of my property, showing just how each section lies and how it's drained and watered." He opened the door and led Pole into a wide hall, and thence, to the right, into a big, bare-looking parlor. "Have a seat, Mr. Baker; my desk is in the little room adjoining."

Pole sat down, crossed his long legs, and put his hat on his knee. When he found himself alone he smiled. "Captain Duncan thought a crabbed old cuss like that 'ud be interested in pore kin," he mused. "Huh! nothin' short o' Vanderbilts an' Jay Goulds 'ud start his family pulse to beatin'. Le' me see, now, how I'd better begin to—"

"Here it is, Mr. Baker." Floyd entered with a map and pencil in his hand. "If you looked the place over when you were there, you may remember that the creek winds round from the bridge to the foot of the hill. Well, right in there—"

"I know, and that's dandy land, Mr. Floyd," Pole broke in. "That's as good as you got, I reckon."

"The very best, Mr. Baker—in fact, it's the part I always rent for cash. I have to have ready money for taxes and interest and the like, you know, and when I strike a man who is able to pay in advance, why, I can make him a reasonable figure, and he gets the best."

## Pole Baker

"It's got a good house on it, too, I believe?" Pole was stroking his chin with a thoughtful air.

"Six rooms, and a well and stable and good cow-house, Mr. Baker." Old Floyd was actually beaming.

"Does the roof leak?" Pole looked at him frankly. "I won't take my wife and children into a leaky house, Mr. Floyd. If I pay out my money, I want ordinary comfort."

"Doesn't leak a drop, Mr. Baker."

Pole stroked his chin for another minute. He was looking down at the worn carpet, but he felt Floyd's eyes fastened eagerly on him.

"Well, what's yore figure, Mr. Floyd?"

"Two hundred dollars a year—half when you move in, and the rest a month later." The old man seemed to hold his breath. The paper which he was folding quivered.

"Well, I wouldn't kick about the price," Pole said. "The only thing that—" Pole seemed to hesitate for a moment, then he went on. "I never like to act in a hurry in important business matters, an' I generally want to be sorter acquainted with a man I deal with. You see, ef I moved on that place it 'ud be to stay a long time, an' thar'd be things on yore side to do year after year. I generally ax fer references, but I'm a-goin' to be straight with you, Mr. Floyd; somehow, I feel all right about you. I like yore face. The truth is, you have a strong favor to a feller up our way. He's the richest young man we got, an' the finest ever God's sun shone on. An' as soon as I heard yore name was Floyd—the same as his is—somehow I felt like you an' him was

## Pole Baker

kin, an' that I wouldn't lose by dealin' with you. Blood will tell, you know."

"Why, who do you mean?" The old man stared in pleased surprise. "All the Floyds I know were broken up by the war. I must say none of them are really rich."

"This Floyd is, you kin bet yore boots on that," Pole said, enthusiastically. "He owns mighty nigh the whole o' our county; he's the biggest money-lender and investor in stocks and bonds I know of. He's fine all round: he'd fight a buzz-saw barehanded; he's got more friends than you kin shake a stick at; he could walk into Congress any election ef he'd jest pass the word out that he wanted the job."

"Why, this is certainly news to me," the old man said. "And you say he resembles me?"

"Got yore eyes to a T, an' long, slim hands like yore'n, an' the same shape o' the head an' neck! Why, shorely you've heard o' Nelson Floyd, junior member o' Mayhew & Floyd, of Springtown, the biggest dealers o' farm supplies in—"

"Oh, Nelson Floyd! Why—why, surely there must be some mistake. He hasn't made money, has he? Why, the only time I ever heard of him he was in destitute circumstances, and—"

"Destitute hell!—I beg yore pardon, Mr. Floyd, that slipped out. But that feller's not only not destitute, but he's the *friend* o' the destitute. What he does fer the pore an' sufferin' every year 'ud start many a man in life."

A flush had crept into Floyd's face, and he leaned forward in warm eagerness. "The truth is, Mr.



## Pole Baker

Baker, that Nelson Floyd is the only child of all the brother I ever had."

"You *don't say!*" exclaimed Pole, holding the old man's eyes firmly, "which brother was that?"

"Charles Nelson—two years younger than I am. The truth is, he and I became estranged. He broke my mother's heart, Mr. Baker. He was very wild and dissipated, though he died bravely in battle. I would have looked after his son, but I lost sight of him and his mother after the war, and, then, I had my own troubles. There are circumstances, too, which I don't care to go over with a—a stranger. But I'm glad the young man has done well. The first I heard of him was about ten years ago. He was then said to be a sort of wild mountain outlaw. It was not natural for me to feel pride in him, or—"

"He *was* wild about that time," Pole said, as he stood up to go, "but he settled down and made a man of hisse'f. I'll let you know about that land, Mr. Floyd. Ef you don't hear from me by—this is Tuesday, ain't it?—ef you don't hear from me by Saturday, you may know that my wife has decided to stay on up the country."

"But"—Floyd's face had fallen—"I hope nothing won't interfere with our deal, Baker. I'd like to have you on my place. I really would."

"All right, we'll live in hopes," said the mountaineer, "ef we die in despair," and Pole went out into the sunlight.

"Now, Poley," he chuckled, "who said you couldn't git all you was after? But *lie!* My Lord, I don't know when I'll ever git all that out o'

## Pole Baker

my body. I feel like I am literally soaked in black falsehood, like a hide in a vat at a tanyard. It's leakin' out o' the pores o' my skin an' runnin' down into my socks. But that dried-up old skunk made me do it. Ef he hadn't a-been so 'feared o' pore kin, I wouldn't 'a' had to sink so low. Well, I've got news fer Nelson, an' that's what I was after."

## XX



It was ten o'clock that night when the stage, or "hack," as it was called, put Pole down in the square at Springtown. He went directly to Floyd's store, hoping to see the young man before he went to bed, but the long building was wrapped in darkness. Pole went over to the little hotel where Floyd roomed. The proprietor, Jerry Malone, and two tobacco drummers sat smoking on the veranda.

"He's jest this minute gone up to his room," the landlord said, in response to Baker's inquiry as to the whereabouts of his friend. "It's the fust door to the right, at the top o' the steps."

Pole went up and knocked on Floyd's door, and the young merchant called out, "Come in."

Baker opened the door, finding the room in darkness. From the bed in the corner Floyd's voice came: "Is that you, Pole?"

"Yes, I jest got back, Nelson. I went to the store expectin' to find you at work, an' then Jerry told me you was up here."

"Light the lamp, Pole," Floyd said. "There are some matches on that table right under your hand."

"Oh, I hain't got long to stay," returned the mountaineer, "an' I don't need a light to talk by, any more 'n a blind man does to write his letters."

## Pole Baker

I 'lowed I'd tell you what I done down thar. I seed Floyd."

"Oh, you did! After you left I got really interested in your venture, and I was afraid you might accidentally miss him."

"Yes, I seed 'im." Pole found a chair and sat down at the little table, resting his hand on it, and tilting the chair back, after his favorite method of making himself comfortable. There was a lamp on a post in front of the hotel and its light came through a window and faintly illuminated the room. Pole could see the white covering of Floyd's bed and the outline of the young man's head and shoulders against a big feather pillow.

"You say you saw him?" Floyd's voice was eager and restrained.

"Yes, an' I got news fer you, Nelson—substantial news. Henry A. Floyd is yore own uncle."

"Good God, Pole!"—Floyd sat up in bed—"don't make any mistakes. You say he is actually—"

"I ain't makin' no mistakes," replied Pole. "He's the only brother of yore daddy, Charles Nelson Floyd. That old cuss told me so, an' I know he was tellin' me a straight tale."

There was silence. Floyd pulled his feet from beneath the coverings and sat up on the bedside. He seemed unable to speak, and, leaning forward in his chair, the ex-moonshiner recounted in careful detail all that had passed between him and the man he had visited. For several minutes after Pole had concluded the merchant sat without visible movement, then Pole heard him take a long, deep breath.

## Pole Baker

"Well, I hope you are satisfied with what I done," said Pole, tentatively.

"Satisfied! Great Heavens!" cried Floyd, "I simply don't know what to say to it—how to tell you what I feel. Pole, I'll bet I'm having the oddest experience that ever came to mortal man. I don't know how to explain it, or make you understand. When a baby's born it's too young to wonder or reflect over its advent into the world, but to-night, after all my years of life, I feel—Pole, I feel somehow as if I were suddenly born again. That dark spot on my history has been in my mind almost night and day ever since I was old enough to compare myself to others. Persons who have strong physical defects are often morbidly sensitive over them. That flaw in my life was my eternally sore point. And my mother"—Floyd's voice sank reverently—"did he say who she was?"

"No, we didn't git fur enough," Pole returned. "You see, Nelson, I got that information by pretendin' to be sorter indifferent about you, an' ef I'd 'a' axed too many questions, the old codger 'ud 'a' suspicioned my game. Besides, as I told you, he wasn't willin' to talk perfectly free. Although yore daddy's in the grave, the old man seems to still bear a sort o' grudge agin 'im, an' that, in my opinion, accounts fer him not helpin' you out when you was a child."

"Ah, I see," said Floyd; "my father was wild as a young man?"

"Yes, that's the way he put it," answered Baker; "but I wouldn't let that bother me, Nelson. Ef yore daddy'd 'a' lived longer, no doubt, he'd 'a'

## Pole Baker

settled down like you have. But he passed away in a good cause. It ort to be a comfort to know he died in battle."

"Yes, that's a comfort," said Floyd, thoughtfully.

"An' now you've got plenty o' kin," Pole said, with a pleasant laugh. "I come over in the hack with Colonel Price and Captain Duncan, an' you ort to 'a' heard 'em both spout about the Floyds an' the Nelsons. They say yore blood's as blue as indigo, my boy, an' that they suspected it all along, on account o' yore pluck and determination to win in ever' game you tackled. Lord, you bet they'll be round to-morrow to give you the hand o' good-fellowship an' welcome you into high life. I reckon you'll sorter cut yore mountain scrub friends."

"I haven't any scrub friends," said Floyd, with feeling. "I don't know that you boast of your ancestry, Pole, but you are as high above the kind of man that does as the stars are above the earth."

"Now you are a - kiddin' me!" said Baker. He put out his hand on the table and felt something smooth and cool under his touch. He drew it to him. It was a pint flask filled with whiskey. He held it up with a laugh. "Good Lord, what are you doin' with this bug-juice?" he asked.

"Oh, you mean that bottle of rye," said Floyd. "I've kept that for a memento of the day I swore off, Pole, five years ago. I thought as long as I could pass it day after day and never want to uncork it, that it was a sign I was safely anchored to sobriety."

There was a little squeak like that of a frightened

## Pole Baker

mouse. Pole had twisted the cork out and was holding the neck of the bottle to his nose.

"Gee whiz!" he exclaimed. "That stuff smells *fine*! You say it's five years old, Nelson?"

"Yes, it's almost old enough to vote," Floyd laughed. "It was very old and mellow when I got it."

The cork squeaked again. Pole had stopped the bottle. It lay flat under his big, pulsating hand. His fingers played over it caressingly. "I wouldn't advise you to keep it under yore eye all the time, Nelson," he said. "I tried that dodge once an' it got the best o' my determination."

"I sometimes feel the old desire come over me," said Floyd; "often when my mind is at rest after work, and even while I am at it, but it is never here in my room in the presence of that memento. It seems to make a man of me. I pity a drinking man, Pole. I know what he has to fight, and I feel now that if I were to lose all hope in life that I'd take to liquor as naturally as a starving man would to food."

"I reckon," said Pole, in a strange, stilled voice. His fingers were now tightly clasped about the bottle. There was a pause, then he slid it cautiously—very cautiously—towards him. He swallowed something that was in his throat; his eyes were fixed in a great, helpless stare on the dim figure across the room. Noiselessly the bottle was raised, and noiselessly it went down into the pocket of his coat.

"I feel like I owe you my life, Pole," Floyd continued, earnestly. "You've done to-day what no

## Pole Baker

one else could have done. If that old man had died without speaking of this matter I'd perhaps never have known the truth. Pole, you can call on me for anything you want that is in my power to give. Do you understand me, Pole, old friend?—anything—anything!"

There was silence. Pole sat staring vacantly in front of him. Floyd rose in slow surprise and came across the room. Pole stood up suddenly, his hand on the weighty pocket. Quickly he shifted to a darker portion of the room nearer the door.

"What's the matter, Pole?" Floyd asked, in surprise.

"Matter? Why, nothin', Nelson." Baker laughed mechanically. "I was jest thinkin' that I ought to be in bed. I've told you all I kin, I guess."

"You were so quiet just now that I thought—really, I didn't know what to think. I was telling you—"

"I know, Nelson." Baker's unsteady hand was on the latch of the door. "Never you mind, I'll call on you if I want anything. I've got yore friendship, I reckon, an' that's enough fer me."

He opened the door and glided out into the hall. "Good-night, Nelson."

"Good-night, Pole, good-night. God bless you, old man!"

On the lonely road leading to his house the mountaineer stopped and drew the bottle from his pocket. "You dern little devil!" he said, playfully, holding it up before his eyes in the starlight. "Here I've gone all day in Atlanta, passin' ten thousand bar-room doors, swearin' by all that was holy that I'd




## Pole Baker

fetch Nelson Floyd his news with a sober head on my shoulders an' a steady tongue *in* that head; an' I rid, too, by hunkey, all the way from Darley out here with a hack-driver smellin' like a bung-hole, with two quarts under his seat an' no tellin' how many under his hide. I say I got through all that, although my jaws was achin' tell they felt like they was loose at the sockets, an' I 'lowed I'd slide safe to the home-base, when *you*—you crawled up under my nose in the dark like a yaller lizard, with that dern tale about yore ripe old age an' kingly flavor. '*Memento*' hell!" Pole was using Floyd's word for the first time. "I'd like to know what sort of a memento you'd make outside of a man's stomach. No, Poley, I reckon you've reached yore limit."

The mouse squeaked again. Pole chuckled. He held the flask aloft and shook it.

"Gentlemen," he said to the countless stars winking merrily down from above, "take one with me," and he drank.

## XXI

WO days after this, Nathan Porter brought home the news of what had happened to Floyd. The family were seated at the dinner-table when he came in warm from his walk along the dusty road. He started to sit down in his place without his coat, but Cynthia rose and insisted on his donning it.

"Folks is sech eternal fools!" he said, as he helped his plate to a green hillock of string-beans, from the sides of which protruded bowlders of gray bacon, and down which ran rivulets of grease.

"What have they been doing now?" asked his wife, curiously.

"They hain't doin' nothin' in town but talkin'," Porter said, in a tone of disgust. "Looks like all business has come to a dead halt, so that everybody kin exchange views about what Nelson Floyd has discovered about his kin. He's found a man—or Pole Baker did fer 'im, when Pole was drunk down in Atlanta—who don't deny he's his uncle—his daddy's own brother—an' you'd think Floyd had unearthed a gold-mine, from all the talk an' well-wishin' among the elect. Old Duncan an' Colonel Price helt a whole crowd spellbound at the post-office this mornin' with the'r tales about the past power an'

## Pole Baker

grandeur of the Nelson an' Floyd families in America, an' all they'd done fer the'r country an' the like."

"Father, is this true?" Cynthia asked, her face almost pale in suppressed excitement.

"I reckon thar's no doubt about it," answered Porter. "Pole Baker's roarin' drunk, an' that always indicates that some'n' good or bad's happened to him or his friends. Thar hain't no money in Floyd's find. The Atlanta man's on the ragged edge; in fact, some say he never would 'a' confessed to the crime ef he hadn't heard that Nelson was well-to-do. I dunno. I hardly ever laugh, but I mighty nigh split my sides while Jim Carden was pokin' fun at 'em all. Jim says all the bon-tons in this section has been treatin' Floyd like a runt pig till now. The Duncans had a big blow-out at the'r house last night. Miss Evelyn's got some Atlanta gals an' boys thar at a house-party, an' the shindig was a big event. Jim said he was standin' nigh Floyd yesterday when he got his invite, an' that Nelson was about to refuse p'int-blank to go, beca'se he'd never been axed thar before he got his blood certificate; but Jim said Pole Baker was standin' thar about half-shot, swayin' back an' forth agin the desk, an' Pole up an' told Floyd that he'd have to accept—that he was as good as any in the land, an' to refuse a thing o' that sort would belittle 'im; an' so Nelson put on a b'iled shirt an' a dicky cravat an' went. Jim said his wife run over with a passle o' other women to help about the dinin'-room an' kitchen, an' that Floyd was *the* high-cockalorum of the whole bunch. He said all the women was at his

## Pole Baker

heels, an' that nothin' was talked except the high an' mighty grandeur that's come an' gone among the Nelsons an' Floyds. Jim said Floyd looked like he wanted to crawl through a knot-hole in the floor. I'll say this fer that feller—blood or no blood, he hain't no dern fool, an' you mark my words, this thing hain't a-goin' to spile 'im nuther. You let a man make hisse'f in life, an' he hain't a-goin' daft about the flabby, ready-made sort."

"You wait and see," Mrs. Porter said, a sneer on her lips, as she critically eyed Cynthia's face. "A man that's as bad as he is, to begin with, will be worse when he is run after like that."

"I dunno," said Porter, his mouth full of beans. "I seed 'im give old Johnson Blare a cut this mornin' that tickled me powerful. The old skunk got out o' his rickety buggy in front o' the store an' went in to congratulate Floyd. I knowed what he was up to, an' follered 'im back to the desk. He told Floyd that he was a sort o' far-off cousin o' the Nelsons, an' that he was prouder of that fact than anything else in the world. I seed Floyd was mad as he looked at the old fellow with his high collar an' frazzley necktie. 'I'm gittin' tired o' the whole business,' Floyd said to 'im. 'I want to be appreciated, if I deserve it, for my *own* sake, an' not on account o' my dead kinsfolk.' An' that certainly did squelch old Blare. He shook all over when he went out."

"I suppose Nelson Floyd will end up by marrying Evelyn Duncan or some of the Prices," Mrs. Porter said, significantly, as she fastened her lynx eye on Cynthia's shrinking face.

"That seems to be the talk, anyway," Porter ad-

## Pole Baker

mitted. "She belongs to the doll-faced, bandbox variety. She'd be a nice little trick to dandle on a fellow's knee, but that's about all she'd be good for."

After the meal was over, Mrs. Porter followed Cynthia out into the kitchen, whither the girl was taking a big pan full of soiled dishes.

"This ought to make you very careful, Cynthia," she said.

"I don't know what you mean, mother." The girl looked up coldly.

"Well, *I* know what I mean," said Mrs. Porter. "People seem to think this will bring about a sort of change in Nelson Floyd's way of living. We are really as good as anybody in this county, but we are poor, and others are rich, and have more social advantages. Evelyn Duncan always has snubbed you girls around here, and no young man has been going in both sets. So far nobody that I know of has talked unkindly about you and Nelson Floyd, but they would be more apt to now than ever. How that thing about the mill ever escaped—"

"Mother, don't bring that up again!" Cynthia said, almost fiercely. "I have heard enough of it. I can't stand any more."

"Well, you know what I mean, and you have my warning," said Mrs. Porter, sternly, "and that's all I can do. As good and respectable a young man as ever lived wants to marry you, and the worst rake in the county has been paying you questionable attentions. The first thing you know, Mr. Hillhouse will get disgusted, and—"

But Cynthia had left her work and gone out into the yard. With a face quite pale and set, she went

## Pole Baker

through the orchard, climbed over the brier-grown rail-fence, and crossed the field and pasture to Pole Baker's house. Mrs. Baker, pale and bedraggled, with a ten-months-old baby on her arm, stood on the little porch of the cottage. At her feet the other children were playing.

"You've heard o' my trouble, I kin see that," the married woman said, as the girl opened the gate. "Come in out o' the sun."

"Yes, I've heard," said Cynthia, "and I came as soon as I could."

They went into the poorly furnished bedroom, with its bare floor belittered with the playthings of the children, and sat down in the straight-backed, rockerless chairs.

"You mustn't notice the way things look," sighed Mrs. Baker. "The truth is, Cynthia, I haven't had the heart to lay my hand to a thing. Pole's been away three nights and three days now, and I don't know what has happened to him. He's quick-tempered and gets into quarrels when he's drinkin'. He may be in jail in Darley, or away off some'rs on the railroad."

"I know, I know," said Cynthia. "Let me hold the baby; you look as if you are about to drop."

"I didn't sleep an hour last night," said Mrs. Baker, as she relinquished the child. "I don't want to complain. He's so good-hearted, Cynthia, and he can't help it to save his life. He's the kindest, sweetest man in the world when he's all right; but these sprees mighty nigh kill me. Take my advice an' don't marry a drinkin' man fer all you do. No—no, not even if you love 'im! It's easier to tear one

## Pole Baker

out o' your heart before you have children by 'im, an' God knows a pore woman ought to have *some* happiness and peace of mind. If Pole don't come home to-day I'm afraid I'll go crazy. Pore little Billy kept wakin' up last night and askin' about his papa. He can't understand. He fairly worships his father."

"We must hope for the best," Cynthia said, sympathetically, and she drew the baby up close to her face and kissed it tenderly.

Late in the afternoon Cynthia went home. She helped her mother prepare supper, and after it was over she followed the example of the others and retired to her room. For an hour she sat sewing at her table, every now and then stifling a sigh. She rose and looked out of her window, at the wing of the house on the left. It was dark; the family were already asleep. She would undress and go to bed, but she knew she would lie awake for a long time, and that she dreaded.

Just then a sound broke the stillness of the night. Ah, she knew it so well! She sank back into her chair, quivering from head to foot in excitement. It was the whippoorwill call. It came again, more insistent, more pleading, but Cynthia sat motionless. Again it came; this time it was as if the weird notes were full of aggrieved inquiry. What was the matter? Why was she delaying? Cynthia rose, moved to the door of her room, but with her hand on the latch she paused. Then she turned back to her table and blew out her light, and began to disrobe in the darkness. No, she would not go in that

## Pole Baker

manner to him again — never — never! To expect such a thing of Evelyn Duncan would not have entered his mind. Her mother was right. Evelyn Duncan was one thing in his estimation — she another. In the darkness she got into bed and drew the covering over her head that she might shut out the sound, for it pained her. There was silence for several minutes, then she heard the night bird's call farther away in the direction of the swamp. Floyd was going home. For hours she lay awake, unable to sleep. Once she sat upright with a start. Perhaps that would be the end. Perhaps she had driven him away, when if only she had obeyed the promptings of her heart he and she might—but he was gone, and, according to her mother's cautious view, she had acted for the best; and yet how could she ever forget the vast respect with which he had treated her that night at the mill? If he had been a bad man he would have shown it then. But he wasn't; he was good and thoughtful of her feelings. And he had come to-night full of his recent discovery. He wanted to tell her all about it, as he had told her of other things touching his inner life, and she had repulsed him—driven him away—to Evelyn Duncan. A sob struggled up in her bosom and forced its way to the surface.



## XXII



WEEK later Pole Baker came back from Darley on foot. He was covered with dust, his clothing was soiled and torn, his hair unkempt. He looked thinner; his big eyes seemed to burn in their deep, dark sockets as if fed by the slow oil of despair. He paused at the well at the court-house to get a drink of water. He drank copiously from the big wooden bucket, and wiped his mouth on the back of his dusty hand. It was a very quiet afternoon at Springtown; scarcely any one was in sight. Pole moved over to the steps of the public building and sat down in abject indecision. "The Lord knows I ort to go on home to Sally an' the childern," he groaned, "but how kin I?—how kin I?"

He sat there for half an hour, his head hanging, his great hands twitching nervously. Presently a shadow fell on the ground before him, and, looking up, he saw a negro boy extending a letter to him.

"A man told me ter give you dis here, Mr. Baker," the boy said.

"What man?" Pole asked, as he took the communication.

"I didn't know 'im, suh. I never seed 'im before. He looked ter me like a mountain man. He was ridin' a little white mule, an' as soon as he gimme de

## Pole Baker

letter an' tol me whar you was a settin' he whipped his mule an' rid off."

Pole held the letter in his hand till the boy had gone, then he tore the envelope open and read it. It slipped from his inert fingers to the ground, and Pole, with glaring eyes, picked it up and read it again and again. To him it was worse than a death-blow.

"Pole Baker," it began; "we, the Mountain-side White Cap Association, beg leave to inform you that we have sat in council at three separate meetings on your case of protracted drunkenness and family neglect. If any other man in the county had done as you have, he would have met with punishment long ago, but your friends put in excuses for you and postponed it. However, we met again last night and decided that it was our duty to act in your case. For ten days now your wife, a sweet, patient woman, has been verging on to despair through you. We hold that no living man has a right to tie a good woman to him by cords of love and pity and then torture her on the rack night and day just to gratify a beastly appetite. This step is being taken with great regret, and by men not known to you, but who admire you in many ways and like you. Punishment has been dealt out here in the mountains to good effect, as you yourself have been heard to admit, and we confidently believe that after we have acted in your case you will be a better man to them that are dependent on you. To-night at eight o'clock sharp our body will be at the gum spring, half-way between your farm and the court-house. If you are there to meet us, the disagreeable matter of whipping you will be done there, out of sight and hearing of your wife and children; if not, we will have to do as we have done in the case of other men, go to your house and take you out. We earnestly hope you will meet us, and that you will be prepared to make us promises that you will keep. Respectfully,

"THE MOUNTAIN-SIDE WHITE CAP ASSOCIATION."

## Pole Baker

Pole stared at the ground for a long time; the veins of his neck and brow stood out as if from physical torture. He looked about him suddenly in a spasm of effort to think of some escape from his impending doom. There was Nelson Floyd. He would grant him any request. He could draw upon the young merchant for unlimited funds, and before the fated hour arrived he could be far away from the country and his wife and children. A great lump rose inside of him and tore itself outward through his throat. No, he couldn't leave them; it was further out of his power now than ever. Besides, had he not brought all this on himself? Was not the threatened punishment equally as just in his case as it had been in the case of others among his neighbors? He rose to his feet. There was nothing left for him to do but to go home, and—yes, meet the White Caps at the appointed place and take what was coming to him bravely. Shoot? Defend his rights? Kill the men who were taking the part of those he himself had sworn to love and stand by?—no! The punishment?—yes; but after that, to his confused brain, all was a painful blank. His wife and children had always comforted him in trouble, but could they do so now? Would not the sight of their anxious faces only add to his load of remorse? As he went along the road towards his home, his rugged breast rose and expanded under his ragged shirt and then slowly fell. He was a dead man alive—a breathing, rotting horror in his own sight. A shudder went over him; he heard the commanding voice of the leader of the outlaws; he felt the lash and braced himself for another blow,

## Pole Baker

which he hoped would cut deep enough to pierce the festering agony within him. Then his lower lip began to quiver, and tears came into his great, glaring eyes. He was beginning to pity himself, for, when all had been said and done, could he really have acted differently? Had God actually given him the moral and physical strength to avoid the pits into which he had stumbled with the helplessness of a little child?

The road led him into the depths of a wood where the boughs of mighty trees arched overhead and obscured the sunlit sky. He envied a squirrel bounding unhindered to its nest. Nature seemed to hold out her vast, soothing arms to him. He wanted to sink into them and sob out his pent-up agony. In the deepest part of the wood, where rugged cliffs bordered the road, he came to the spring mentioned in the letter. Here he paused and looked about him. On this spot the most awful experience of his rugged life would be enacted.

With a shudder he passed on. The trees grew less dense, and then on a rise ahead of him he saw his humble cottage, like a cheerless blot on the green lush-sward about it. He wanted now to search the face of his wife. For ten days, the letter said, she had suffered. She had suffered so much that the neighbors had taken up her cause—they had taken it up when he—great God!—when he loved her and the children with every tortured cord of his being! They had come to his wife's aid against him, her prime enemy. Yes, they should whip him, and he would tell them while they were at it to lay it on—to lay it on! and God sanction the cause.

## Pole Baker

He entered the gate. His wife was sitting in the little hall, a wooden bowl in her lap, shelling pease; on a blanket at her feet lay the baby. He went up the steps and stood in the doorway. She raised her eyes and saw him, and then lowered her head, saying nothing, though she was deathly pale. He stared helplessly for a moment, and then went out behind the house and sat down in a chair under a tree, near his beehives and his bent-toothed, stone-weighted harrow. A deeper feeling of despair had come over him, for it was the first time his wife had ever refused to greet him in some way or other on his return home. On the banks of a spring branch below the barn, he saw his older children playing, but he could not bear the sight of them, and, with his elbows on his knees, he covered his face with his hands. The memory came to him of men who had killed themselves when in deep trouble, but he brushed the thought away. They were shirking cowards. For half an hour he sat thus. He heard the children laughing as they continued their romp up and down the stream. Then his wife slowly came out to him. She was still pale, and it seemed to him that she was thinner than she had ever been before.

"Pole, darlin'," she began, with a catch in her voice, "some o' the neighbors has been tellin' me that I ort not to be kind an' good to you when you come home after you've done us this away, an' I acknowledge I did try just now to act sorter cold, but I can't. Oh, Pole, I ain't mad at you, darlin'! My heart is so full o' joy at seein' you back home, safe an' sound, that I don't know what to do. I

## Pole Baker

know you are sorry, darlin', fer you always are, an' you look more downcast than I ever seed you in all my life. Oh, Pole, I've suffered, I'll admit, but that can't equal my joy right now at seein' you home with that sweet, sorry look in yore eyes. Pole, darlin', won't you kiss me? You would ef I hadn't turned from you as I did in the house jest now. Don't—don't blame me! I hardly knowed what I was doin'."

A sob rose in him and burst. She saw his emotion, and put her arms around his neck.

"It was that meddlesome old Mrs. Snodgrass who put me up to actin' that away," she said, tenderly. "But I'll never do it ag'in. The idea! An' me ever' bit as happy as I was the day we married one another! Thar comes little Billy, as hard as he kin move his little fat legs. Wipe yore eyes, Pole; don't let him see you a-cryin'. He'd remember it all his life—childern are so quar. Thar, wipe 'em on my apron—no, le' *me* do it. He's axed about you a hundred times a day. The neighbors' childern talked before him an' made him wonder."

The child, red in the face and panting, ran into his father's outstretched arms.

"Whar you been, papa?" he asked.

"Over to Darley, Billy," Pole managed to say.

"Are you goin' to stay at home any more, papa?" was the next query.

"Yes, Billy—I hope so. What have you childern been playing with down at the branch?"

"Johnny made a boat, papa, but it wouldn't swim. It sunk when he put sand on it. Will you make me a boat, papa?"

## Pole Baker

"Yes, Billy."

"When, papa?"

"To-morrow, Billy." Pole pressed his rough face to the child's smooth, perspiring brow, and then put him down. "Now run and play," he said.

"I've put on some coffee to boil," said Mrs. Baker when the child had left. "I know you want some. Pole, you look all unstrung. I never seed you so nervous. Yore hands are twitchin', an' I never seed sech a awful look in yore face. Don't you want me to cook some'n' special fer you to eat, Pole?"

"Not a thing, Sally," he gulped. "The coffee is enough."

She went into the house and came back with it. As she drew near he noted that the sun was fast going down; the shadow of the hill, to the west of the cottage, was creeping rapidly across the level field below. It would soon be eight o'clock, and then—"

"Here it is," said Sally, at his elbow. "It's as strong as I could make it. It will steady your nerves. Oh, Pole, I'm so glad you got back! I couldn't have gone through another night like the others. It would have killed me."

He raised the coffee-cup to keep from seeing her wistful, dark-ringed eyes.

Night came on apace. He sat in his chair while she busied herself with heeding and putting the children to bed. Her voice rang with joy and relief as she spoke to them; once she sang a bar of an old ballad. It vividly recalled their courtship days. He moved his chair to the porch. He sat there awhile, and then went to feed his horse and cattle,

## Pole Baker

telling himself, the while, that he had made his wife do his work for the past ten days that he might sink to the level of a beast.

After supper the two sat together in the moonlight on the porch, he silent, she talkative and full of joy. The old-fashioned clock on the mantel within struck seven. He waited about half an hour longer, and then he rose to his feet.

"I want to go to the store and see Nelson Floyd," he said. "I'll be back inside of an hour, sure."

She stared at him irresolutely for a moment, then she uttered a low groan.

"Oh, Pole, Pole, Pole! I don't want you to go," she cried. "You know why. If you get whar any liquor is now, you—you may go off again. Stay with me, Pole! I'll give you some strong coffee. I'll do anything ruther than have you out o' my sight now that you are safe at home. You won't spile all my happiness by goin' off again. Will you, darlin'?"

He caught her wrist with his left hand and held his right steadily upward.

"I'll swear to you, Sally, before God, that I won't tetch a single drop, and that I'll be back inside of an hour. You kin trust me now, Sally. You never heard me speak this way before."

Their eyes met. "Yes, I kin trust you when you talk that away," she said. "Don't be gone longer than an hour, Pole. I'll set right here on the porch and wait for you."

"All right. I'll keep my word, Sally."


Out at the gate he passed, moving away, his head down, his long arms swinging disconsolately at his



## **Pole Baker**

sides. When out of sight of the cottage he quickened his step. He must not be late. They must not, under any circumstances, come nearer to his house than the spring, and he must try to secure their promise not to let his degradation reach the ears of his wife and children. He could not stand that.

## XXIII

 REACHING the appointed place, he sat down on the trunk of a fallen tree to wait. By-and-by he heard voices in the distance, and then the tramp, tramp of footsteps. A dark blur appeared in the moonlight on the road. It was a body of men numbering between twenty-five and thirty. They were all afoot, and, by way of precaution against identification, they wore white caps over their heads, with holes for the eyes. In their mouths they had stuffed wads of cotton to muffle and disguise their voices.

"Well, I see you've acted sensible, Baker," said a man who seemed in the lead. "Some o' the boys 'lowed you'd cut an' shoot; but you hain't armed, are you, Pole?"

"No, I hain't armed, Joe Dilworthy."

"Huh, you think you know me!" the speaker said, with a start.

"Yes, I know you," answered Pole. "I'd know you anywhar in the world by yore shape an' voice."

"Well, you may *think* I'm anybody you like," returned the masked man. "That's neither here nor thar. I've been app'inted to do the talkin' to-night, Pole, an' I want to say, at the start, that

## Pole Baker

this is the most disagreeable job that this association ever tackled. Yore case has been up before our body time after time, an' some'n' always throwed it out, fer you've got stacks an' stacks o' friends. But action was finally tuck, an' here we are. Pole, do you know any valid reason why you shouldn't be treated like other malefactors in these mountains?"

There was silence. Pole's head was hanging down. They could not see his face in the moonlight.

"No, I don't see no reason," the condemned man finally said. "I'm here to meet you, to tell you that I deserve more 'n you fellows could lay on me ef you begun now an' kept up a steady lick till the last one of you was fagged out. The only trouble, gentlemen, is that I hain't a-goin' to *feel* the lash. Thar's a pain inside o' me so keen an' fur down that what you do jest to my body won't count. You are the friends of my wife an' childern; you are better friends to 'em than I've been, an' I want you to strip me to my dirty hide an' whip my duty into me, ef that is possible. The only thing I would ask is to spare my folks the knowledge of it, ef you kin see it that away. Keep this thing quiet—jest amongst us. I may be able to brace up an' try to do right in the future, but I don't believe I kin ef they know o' my humiliation. I don't ax that as a favor to myself, you understand, gentlemen, but to them you are befriending—a weak woman an' helpless little childern."

Pole ceased speaking. There was profound silence, broken only by the croaking of frogs in the spring branch near by. Dilworthy thrust his hands

## Pole Baker

into the pockets of his trousers awkwardly, and slowly turned his eyeholes upon the eyeholes about him, but no one made sign or sound.

"Boys, you all hear what Pole says," finally came from him. "He seems to feel—I mought say to realize—that—" The voice spent itself in the folds of the speaker's mask.

"Hold! I want to say a word." A tall, lank man stepped from the group, spitting wads of cotton from his mouth and lifting the cap from his head. "I'm Jeff Wade, Pole. You see who I am. You kin appear agin me before the grand jury an' swear I'm a member o' this gang, ef you want to. I don't give a damn. In j'inin' the association, I tuck the oath to abide by what the majority done. But I didn't take no oath that I wouldn't talk when I got ready, an' I want now to explain, as is my right, I reckon, how I happen to be here. I've fit this case agin you fer several meetin's with all my soul an' strength, beca'se I knowed you was too good a man at heart to whip like a dog fer what you've done. I fit it an' fit it, but last meetin' my wife was down havin' another twelve-pound boy, as maybe you heard, an' somehow in my absence the vote went agin you. Strong speeches was made by yore wife's kin about her treatment, an' action was finally tuck. But I'm here to say that every lick that falls on yore helpless back to-night will hurt me more than ef they was on me. You've made a better man out o' me in a few ways, Pole, an', by God! I'm a-goin' to feel like some o' that dirty crowd felt away back thar when they went along an' sanctioned the death agony of our Saviour.

## Pole Baker

You are too good a man, Pole, to be degraded this away. What you've done agin yore own was through weakness that you couldn't well help. We've all got our faults, but I don't know a man in this gang that's got as many good p'int's to counteract the bad as you have."

"That's all right, Jeff," Pole said, stolidly. "What you say don't excuse me. I stand here to-night convicted by my neighbors of mistreatin' my own blood an' heart kin, an' I don't want nobody to defend me when sech men as Sandy McHugh tuck what was comin' to them without a whimper. I don't know what effect it's goin' to have on me. I cayn't see that fur ahead. I've tried to quit liquor about as hard as any man alive, an' I'm not goin' to make promises an' break 'em. After this is over, I reckon I'll do whatever the Lord has laid out fer me to do."

"Pole, I'm Mel Jones!" Another tall man divested himself of cap and mask and stood out in full view. "I voted agin this, too. I'm yore friend, Pole. That's all I got to say."

"That's all right, Mel," said Pole, "an' I'm much obliged to you. But, gentlemen, I told my wife I was goin' to town an' would be straight back. You hain't said whether it would be possible to keep this thing quiet—"

"Quiet hell!" snorted Dilworthy. "Do you damn fools think I'm goin' to act as leader fer a lot o' sniffin' idiots that don't know whar they are at or how they got thar? It may not be parliamentary by a long shot, but as chairman o' this meetin' I'm goin' to say that I think you've all made a mess

## Pole Baker

of the whole thing. I 'lowed I could abide by what the majority done in any matter that was pendin' before us, but I'll be derved ef I'm in favor o' tetchin' *that thar man*. I'd every bit as soon drag my old mammy from the grave an' whip her as a man feelin' like that thar 'un. I believe Pole Baker's tried as hard as any livin' mortal to behave hisse'f, an' that's enough. A gang o' men that's goin' about whippin' folks who's doin' the'r level best ort to be in better business, an' from to-night on—oath or no oath—I'm a-goin' to let the law o' the land manage the conduct o' my neighbors, as fur as I am concerned. It may be contrary to parliamentary rules, as I say, but this damn thing is so lopsided to-night that I'm a-goin' to put it to another vote. Maybe, ef Pole had a-been allowed to 'a' made a statement you'd 'a' seed this thing different. Now, all in favor of enactin' the verdict of our court in this case hold up yore hands."

There was a portentous pause. Not a hand was raised.

"See thar? What did I tell you?" Dilworthy exclaimed, in disgust. "Not a man amongst you knows his own mind. Now, to the contrary: all in favor o' sendin' Baker home without tetchin' him raise yore hands."

Every hand went up. Pole stared blankly from one stiff token of pity to another, then his head went down. The brim of his old hat hid his face. He was silent. The crowd was filtering away. Soon only Jeff Wade was left. He gave Pole his hand, and in an awkward voice said: "Go home

## Pole Baker

now, old friend. Don't let Sally suspicion this. It would hurt her mighty bad."

Pole said nothing at all, but, returning Wade's hand-pressure, he moved away in the soft moonlight.

## XXIV



THE following Sunday morning Nelson Floyd went to church. From the doorway he descried a vacant seat on the side of the house occupied by the men and boys, and when he had taken it and looked over the well-filled room, he saw that he had Cynthia Porter in plain view. She had come alone. A few seats behind her he saw Pole Baker and his wife. Pole had never looked better. He wore a new suit of clothes and had recently had his hair trimmed. Floyd tried to catch his eye, but Pole looked neither to the right nor left, seeming only intent on Hillhouse, who had risen to read the chapter from the Bible which contained the text for his sermon. In their accustomed places sat Captain Duncan and his daughter Evelyn. The old gentleman had placed his silk-hat on the floor at the end of the bench on which he sat, and his kid-gloved hands rested on his gold-headed, ebony cane, which stood erect between his knees.

When the service was over and the congregation was passing out, Floyd waited for Cynthia, whom he saw coming out immediately behind the Duncans. "Hello, Floyd; how are you?" the captain exclaimed, cordially, as he came up. "Going home? Daughter and I have a place for you in the carriage and will



## Pole Baker

drop you at the hotel—that is, if you won't let us take you on to dinner."

Floyd flushed. Cynthia was now quite near, and he saw from her face that she had overheard the invitation.

"I thank you very much, captain," Floyd said, as he smiled and nodded to her, "but I see that Miss Cynthia is alone, and I was just waiting to ask her to let me walk home with her."

"Ah, I see!" Duncan exclaimed, with a gallant bow and smile to Cynthia. "I wouldn't break up a nice thing like that if I could. I haven't forgotten my young days, and this is the time of the year, my boy, when the grass is green and the sun drives you into the shade."

With a very haughty nod to Floyd and Cynthia together, Evelyn Duncan walked stiffly on ahead of her father.

Outside, Cynthia looked straight into the eyes of her escort.

"Why did you refuse Captain Duncan's invitation?" she asked.

"Why did I?" He laughed, mysteriously. "Because during service I made up my mind that I'd get to you before the parson did; and then I had other reasons."

"What were they?"

"Gossip," he said, with a low, significant laugh.

"Gossip? I don't understand," Cynthia said, perplexed.

"Well, I heard," Floyd replied, "that since I've been finally invited to Duncan's house I'll run there night and day, and that it will end in my

## Pole Baker

marrying that little bunch of lace and ribbons. I heard other speculations, too, on my future conduct, and as I saw our village talker, Mrs. Snodgrass, was listening just now, I was tickled at the chance to decline the invitation and walk home with you. It will be all over the country by night."

They were traversing a cool, shaded road now, and as most of the congregation had taken other directions, they were comparatively alone.

"Evelyn Duncan is in love with you," Cynthia said, abruptly, her glance on the ground.

"That's ridiculous," Floyd laughed. "Simply ridiculous."

"I know—I saw it in her face when you said you were going home with me. She could have bitten my head off."

"Good gracious, I've never talked with her more than two or three times in all my life."

"That may be, but she has heard dozens of people say it will be just the thing for you to marry her, and she has wondered—" Cynthia stopped.

"Look here, little woman, we've had enough of this," Floyd said, abruptly. "I saw the light in your room the other night, and I stood and whistled and whistled, but you wouldn't come to me. I had a lot to tell you."

"I told you I'd never meet you that way again, and I meant it." Cynthia was looking straight into his eyes.

"I know you did, but I thought you might relent. I was chock full of my new discovery—or rather Pole Baker's—and I wanted to pour it out on you."

## Pole Baker

"Of course, you are happy over it?" Cynthia said, tentatively.

"It has been the one great experience of my life," said Floyd, impressively. "No one who has not been through it, Cynthia, can have any idea of what it means. It is on my mind at night when I go to bed; it is in my dreams; it is in my thoughts when I get up."

"I wanted to know about your mother," ventured the girl, reverently. "What was she like?"

"That is right where I'm in the dark," Floyd answered. "Pole didn't get my new relative to say a thing about her. I would have written to him at length, but Pole advised me to wait till I could see him personally. My uncle seems to be a crusty, despondent, unlucky sort of old fellow, and, as there was a kind of estrangement between him and my father, Pole thinks it would irritate him to have to answer my letters. However, I am going down to Atlanta to call on him next Wednesday."

"Oh, I see," said Cynthia. "Speaking of Pole Baker—I suppose you heard of what the White Caps did the other night?"

"Yes, and it pained me deeply," said Floyd, "for I was the indirect cause of the whole trouble."

"You?"

"Yes, Pole is this way: It is usually some big trouble or great joy that throws him off his balance, and it was the good news he brought to me that upset him. It was in my own room at the hotel, too, that he found the whiskey. A bottle of it was on my table and he slipped it into his pocket and took it off with him. I never missed it till I heard

## Pole Baker

he was on a spree. His friends are trying to keep his wife from finding out about the White Caps."

"They needn't trouble further," Cynthia said, bitterly. "I was over there yesterday. Mrs. Snodgrass had just told her about it, and I thought the poor woman would die. She ordered Mrs. Snodgrass out of the house, telling her never to darken her door again, and she stood on the porch, as white as death, screaming after her at the top of her voice. Mrs. Snodgrass was so frightened that she actually broke into a run."

"The old hag!" Floyd said, darkly. "I wish the same gang would take her out some night and tie her tongue at least."

"Mrs. Baker came back to me then," Cynthia went on. "She put her head in my lap and sobbed as if her heart would break. Nothing I could possibly say would comfort her. She worships the ground Pole walks on. And she *ought* to love him. He's good and noble and full of tenderness. She saw him coming while we were talking, and quickly dried her eyes.

"'He mustn't see me crying,' she said. 'If he thought I knew this he would never get over it.'

"He came in then and noticed her red eyes, and I saw him turn pale as he sat studying her face. Then to throw him off she told him a fib. She told him I'd been taking her into my confidence about something which she was not at liberty to reveal."

"Ah, I see," exclaimed Floyd, admiringly. "She's a shrewd little woman—nearly as shrewd as he is."

"But he acted queerly after that, I must say,"

## Pole Baker

Cynthia went on. "He at once quit looking at her, and sat staring at me in the oddest way. I spoke to him, but he wouldn't answer. When I was going home, he followed me as far as the barn. 'You couldn't tell me that secret, could you, little sister?' he said, with a strange, excited look on his face. Of course, I saw that he thought it was some trouble of mine, but I couldn't set him right and be true to his wife, and so I said nothing. He walked on with me to the branch, still looking worried; then, when we were about to part, he held out his hand. 'I want to say right here, little sister,' he said, 'that I love you like a brother, and if any harm comes to you, *in any way*, I'll be with you.'"

"He's very queer," said Floyd, thoughtfully. They were now near the house and he paused. "I'll not go any farther," he said. "It will do no good to disturb your mother. She hates the ground I walk on. She will only make it unpleasant for you if she sees us together. Good-bye, I'll see you when I get back from Atlanta."

## XXV



THE following Wednesday afternoon, when he had concluded his business at one of the larger wholesale houses in Atlanta, Nelson Floyd took a street-car for his uncle's residence. Reaching it, he was met at the door by the white woman who had admitted Pole Baker to the house on his visit to Atlanta. She explained that her master had only gone across the street to see a neighbor, and that he would be back at once. She led Floyd into the old-fashioned parlor and gave him one of the dilapidated, hair-cloth chairs, remaining in the room to put a few things to rights, and dusting the furniture with her apron. On either side of the mantel-piece hung a crude oil-portrait, in cracked and chipped gilt frames of very massive make. The one on the right was that of a dark-haired gentleman in the conventional dress of seventy-five years previous. The other was evidently his wife, a woman of no little beauty. They were doubtless family portraits, and Floyd regarded them with reverential interest. The servant saw him looking at them and remarked:

"They are Mr. Floyd's mother and father, sir. The pictures were made a long time ago. Old Mr. Floyd was a very smart man in his day, and his wife was considered a great beauty and a belle, so I've heard folks say, though I'm sure I don't see how

## Pole Baker

any woman could be popular with her hair fixed that bungly way. But Mr. Floyd is very proud of the pictures. He wouldn't sell them for any price. We thought the house was going to burn down one day when the kitchen-stove turned over, and he sprained his ankle climbing up in a chair to get them down."

"They are my grandparents," he told her.

"You don't say! Then you are Mr. Floyd's—"

"I'm his nephew. My name is Floyd—Nelson Floyd. I've never met my uncle."

"Oh, I see!" The woman's brow was corrugated. "Mr. Floyd *did* have a brother who died young, but I don't think I ever heard him speak of him. But he don't talk much to anybody, and now—la me!—he's so worried over his business that he's as near crazy as any man I ever saw. You say you haven't ever seen him! Then you'd better not expect him to be very sociable. As I say, he's all upset over business. The way he's doing is the talk of the neighborhood. There, I heard the gate shut. I reckon that's him now."

She went to one of the front windows and parted the curtains and looked out.

"Yes, that's him. I'll go and tell him you are here."

Nelson heard the door open and close and then muffled voices, a gruff, masculine one, and that of the servant lowered persuasively. Heavy steps passed on down the hall, and then the woman came back.

"I told him you was here, sir," she said. "He's gone to his room, but will be back in a minute."

He's queer, sir; if you haven't seen him before you had as well be prepared for that. I heard Dr. Plympton say the other day that if he didn't stop worrying as he is that he'd have a stroke of paralysis."

The woman retired and the visitor sat for several moments alone. Presently he heard the heavy steps in the hall and Henry A. Floyd came in. He was very pale, his skin appearing almost ashen in color, and his eyes, under their heavy brows, had a restless, shifting expression. Nelson felt repelled in a way he could not account for. The old man failed to offer any greeting, and it was only the caller's extended hand that seemed to remind him of the courtesy due a stranger. Even then only the ends of his cold fingers touched those of the young man. A thrill of intense and disagreeable surprise passed over Nelson, for his uncle stood staring at him steadily, without uttering a word.

"Did your servant tell you who I am?" the young man ventured, in no little embarrassment.

"Yes, she told me," old Floyd answered. "She told me."

"From your stand-point, sir," Nelson said, "perhaps I have little excuse for coming to see you without an intimation from you that such a visit would be welcome, but I confess I was so anxious to hear something from you about my parents that I couldn't wait longer."

"Huh, I see, I see!" exclaimed the old man, his glance on the floor.

"You may understand my eagerness more fully," said Nelson, "when I tell you that you are the first



## Pole Baker

and only blood relative I remember ever to have seen."

The old man shrugged his bent shoulders, and Nelson was almost sure that he sneered, but no sound came from his tightly compressed lips.

The young man, in even greater embarrassment, looked at the portraits on the wall, and, for the lack of anything more appropriate to say, remarked: "Your servant tells me that these are my grandparents—your father and mother."

"Yes, they are my parents," the old man said, deep down in his throat. Then all of a sudden his eyes began to flash angrily. "That old hussy's been talking behind my back, has she? I'll teach her what her place is in my house, if—"

"Oh, she only answered a question or two of mine," said Nelson, pacifically. "I told her you were my uncle and for that reason I was interested in family portraits."

"*Your uncle!*" That was all the reply old Floyd made.

Nelson stared at him in deep perplexity for a moment, then he said: "I hope I am not on the wrong track, sir. A friend of mine—a rough mountaineer, it's true, but a sterling fellow—called here some time ago, and he came back and told me that you said—"

"He came here like the spy that he was," snorted the old man. "He came here to my house pretending to want to rent land, and in that way got into my confidence and had me talk about family matters; but he didn't want to rent land. When he failed to come back my suspicions were roused and

## Pole Baker

I made inquiries. I found out that he was the sharpest, keenest man among mountain revenue detectives, and that he had no idea of leaving his present location. Now I'd simply like to know what you and he are after. I haven't got anything for you—not a dollar in the world, nor any property that isn't mortgaged up to the hilt. Why did you send a man of that kind to me?"

"You actually astound me, sir," Nelson said. "I hardly know what to say."

"I reckon you don't—now that I hurl the unexpected truth into your teeth. You didn't think I'd be sharp enough to inquire about that fellow Baker, did you? You thought a man living here in a city as big as this would let a green country lout like that get him in a trap. Huh! But I wasn't a fool, sir. You thought you were getting facts from me through him, but you were not, by a long shot. I wasn't going to tell a stranger like that delicate family matters. God knows your father's conduct was disgraceful enough without my unfolding his life to a coarse greenhorn so long after his death. You know the reputation my brother Charles had, don't you?"

"Not till it came from you, sir," said Nelson, coldly. "Baker told me you said he was a little wild, that he drank—"

"My father kicked him out of our home, I tell you," the old man snapped. "He told him never to darken his door again, after the way he lived before the war and during it. It completely broke that woman's heart." Old Floyd pointed a trembling finger at his mother's portrait. "I don't under-

## Pole Baker

stand why you—how you can come here as you do, calling me your uncle as if you had a right to do so.”

“Right to do so?—stop!” Nelson took him up sharply. “What do you mean? I’ve the right to ask that, sir, anyway.”

“Oh, you know what I mean, I reckon. That man Baker intimated that you knew all about your family history. You know that your mother and my poor, deluded brother were never married, that they—”

“Not married!” Nelson Floyd shrank as if he had been struck in the face. “For God’s sake don’t say that! I can stand anything but that.”

“I won’t ask you to believe me without ample proof,” old Floyd answered, harshly. “Wait here a minute.”

Nelson sank into a chair, and pale and trembling, and with a heart that seemed dead within him, he watched the old man move slowly from the room. Old Floyd returned presently. An expression that seemed born of grim, palpitating satisfaction lay on his colorless face; a triumphant light blazed in his sullen eyes. He held some books and a package of letters in his hands.

“Here are your father’s letters to my parents,” he began. “The letters will tell the whole story. They bear his signature. If you doubt their authenticity—if you think the name is forged, you can compare it to all the specimens of his writing in these old school-books of his. This is a diary he kept in college. You can see from its character how his life was tending. The letters are later, after he met your mother—a French girl—in New Orleans.”

## Pole Baker

For a moment Nelson stared up into the withered face above him, and then, with a groan of dawning conviction, he took the letters. He opened the one on the top.

How strange! The handwriting was not unlike his own. But that was too trivial to marvel over. It was the contents of the letter that at once benumbed and tore his heart in twain.

"Dear father and mother," it began; "I am longing for the old home to-night; but, as you say, it is perhaps best that I should never come back again, especially as the facts are known in the neighborhood. The things you write me in regard to Annette's past are, alas! only too true. I don't deny them. Perhaps I'm the only one in the world who will overlook them, for I happen to know how she was tried by poverty and temptation when she was hardly more than a child. But on one point I can set your minds at rest. You seem to think that I intend to marry her; but I promise you now that I shall never link your honored name to hers. Really the poor girl doesn't wish it. She seems to understand how you feel exactly. And the baby! you are worried over its future. Let that go. As soon as the war is over, I shall do my full duty by it. It is nameless, as you say, and that fact may sting it later in life, but such things have happened before, and, my dear father and mother, young men have fallen into bad ways before, and—"

Nelson Floyd read no further. Turning the time-stained sheet over, he saw his father's signature. With lifeless fingers he opened one or two of the other letters. He tried to glance at the fly-leaves of the books on his quivering knees, but there was a blur before his sight. The scrawny hands of the old man were stretched out to prevent the mass from falling to the floor.

## Pole Baker

"Are you satisfied? That's the main thing," he said. "Because, if you are not, there are plenty of legal records which—"

"I am satisfied." Nelson stood up, his inert hand on the back of the rocking-chair he had just vacated.

"I was going to say if you are not I can give you further proof. I can cite to you old legal documents to which my brother signed his name. He got hard up and sold a piece of land to me once. I have that deed. You are welcome to—"

"I am satisfied." Those words seemed the only ones of which the young man's bewildered brain were capable. But he was a gentleman to the core of his being. "I'm sorry I intruded on you, Mr. Floyd. Only blind ignorance on my part—" He went no further.

The inanimate objects about him, the chairs, the table, the door towards which he was moving, seemed to have life.

"Well, good-day." Old Floyd remained in the centre of the room, the books and letters held awkwardly under his stiff arm. "I see that you were not expecting this revelation, but you might as well have been told to-day as later. I understand that the Duncans and Prices up your way are under wrong impressions about your social standing, but I didn't want to be the one to open their eyes. I really don't care myself. However, a thing like that is sure to get out sooner or later."

"They shall know the truth," said Floyd, with the lips of a dead man. "I shall not sail under false colors. Good-day, Mr. Floyd."

## Pole Baker

Out into the broad, balmy sunlight the young man went. There was a despondent droop upon him. His step was slow and uncertain, his feet seemed to him to have weights attached to them. He walked on to the corner of the next street and leaned against a tree. From the city's palpitating heart and stony veins came the hum of traffic on wheels, the clanging of bells, the escaping of steam. Near by some one was practising a monotonous exercise on a piano. He looked up at the sky with the stare of a subject under hypnotic influence.

A lump was in his dry throat. He made an effort to swallow it down, but it stuck and pained him. Persons passing caught sight of his face and threw back stares of mute inquiry as they moved on. After half an hour of aimless wandering here and there through the crowded streets, he paused at the door of a bar-room. He recognized the big gilt sign on the plate-glass windows, and remembered being there years before at midnight with some jolly friends and being taken to his hotel in a cab. After all, whiskey now, as then, would furnish forgetfulness, and that was his right. He went in and sat down at a little round table in the corner of the room. On a shelf near him was a bowl of brown pretzels, a plate of salted pop-corn, a saucer of parched coffee-beans mixed with cloves. One of the bartenders came to him, a towel over his arm. "What will you have, sir?" he asked.

"Rye whiskey straight," said the customer, his eyes on the sawdust at his feet. "Bring the bottle along."

## XXVI



O Cynthia the day on which she expected Floyd to return from Atlanta passed slowly. Something told her that he would come straight to her from the station, on his arrival, and she was impatient to hear his news. The hack usually brought passengers over at six o'clock, and at that time she was on the porch looking expectantly down the road leading to the village. But he did not come. Seven o'clock struck—eight; supper was over and her parents and her grandmother were in bed.

"I simply will not go to meet him in the grape-  
arbor any more," she said to herself. "He is waiting to come later, but I'll not go out, as much as I'd like to hear about his mother. He thinks my curiosity will drive me to it, but he shall see."

However, when alone in her room she paced the floor in an agony of indecision and beset by strange, unaccountable forebodings. Might not something have happened to him? At nine o'clock she was in bed, but not asleep. At half-past nine she got up. The big bed of feathers seemed a great, smothering instrument of torture; she could scarcely get her breath. Throwing a shawl over her, she went out on the porch and sat down in a chair.

## Pole Baker

She had been there only a moment when she heard her mother's step in the hall, and, turning her head, she saw the gaunt old woman's form in the doorway.

"I heard you walking about," Mrs. Porter said, coldly, "and got up to see what was the matter. Are you sick?"

"No, mother, I simply am not sleepy, that's all."

The old woman advanced a step nearer, her sharp eyes on the girl's white night-gown and bare feet. "Good gracious!" she cried. "You'll catch your death of cold. Go in the house this minute. I'll bet I know why you can't sleep. You are worried about what people are saying about Nelson Floyd's marrying Evelyn Duncan and throwing you over, as he no doubt has many other girls."

"I wasn't thinking of it, mother." Cynthia rose and started in. "He can marry her if he wants to."

"Oh, well, you can pretend all you like. I reckon your pride would make you defend yourself. Now, go in the house."

In the darkness of her room Cynthia sat on the side of her bed. She heard her mother's bare feet as the old woman went along the hall back to her room in the rear. Floyd might be in the grape-arbor now. As her light was extinguished, he would think she had gone to bed, and he would not whistle. Then a great, chilling doubt struck her. Perhaps he had really gone to Duncan's to see Evelyn. But no, a warm glow stole over her as she remembered that he had declined to go home from church in the captain's carriage that he might walk with her. No, it was not that; but perhaps some accident had



## Pole Baker

happened to him—the stage-horses might have become frightened on that dangerous mountain road. The driver was often intoxicated, and in that condition was known to be reckless. Cynthia threw herself back in bed and pulled the light covering over her, but she did not go to sleep till far towards morning.

The sun was up when she awoke. Her mother was standing near her, a half-repentant look fitting over her wrinkled face.

"Don't get up unless you feel like it," she said. "I've done your work and am keeping your coffee and breakfast warm."

"Thank you, mother." Cynthia sat up, her mind battling with both dreams and realities.

"You don't look like you are well," Mrs. Porter said. "I watched you before you waked up. You are awfully dark under the eyes."

"I'll feel all right when I am up and stirring around," Cynthia said, avoiding her mother's close scrutiny. "I tell you I'm not sick."

When she had dressed herself and gone out into the dining-room she found a delicious breakfast waiting for her, but she scarcely touched the food. The coffee she drank for its stimulating effect, and felt better. All that morning, however, she was the helpless victim of recurring forebodings. When her father came in from the village at noon she hung about him, hoping that he would drop some observation from which she might learn if Floyd had returned, but the quaint old gossip seemed to talk of everything except the subject to which her soul seemed bound.

## Pole Baker

About the middle of the afternoon Mrs. Porter said she wanted a spool of cotton thread, and Cynthia offered to go to the village for it.

"Not in this hot sun," the old woman objected.

"I could keep in the shade all the way," Cynthia told her.

"Well, if you'll do that, you may go," Mrs. Porter gave in. "I don't know but what the exercise will do you good. I tell you, I don't like the looks of your skin and eyes. I'm afraid you are going to take down sick. You didn't touch breakfast and ate very little dinner."

Cynthia managed to laugh reassuringly as she went for her hat and sunshade. Indeed, the prospect even of activity had driven touches of color into her cheeks and her step was light and alert as she started off—so at least thought Mrs. Porter, who was looking after her from a window. But what did the trip amount to? At Mayhew & Floyd's store Joe Peters waited on her and had nothing to say of Floyd. While the clerk's back was turned Cynthia threw a guarded glance in the direction of Floyd's desk, but the shadows of the afternoon had enveloped that part of the room in obscurity, and she saw nothing that would even indirectly reply to her heart's question. It was on her tongue to inquire if Floyd had returned, but her pride laid a firm hand over her pretty mouth, and with her small purchase tightly clasped in her tense fingers, she went out into the street and turned her face homeward.

The next day passed in much the same way, and the night. Then two other days and nights of

## Pole Baker

racking torture came and went. The very lack of interest in the subject, of those about her, was maddening. She was sure now that something vital had happened to her lover, and Saturday at noon, when her father came from the village, she saw that he was the bearer of news. She knew, too, that it concerned Floyd before the old man had opened his lips.

"Well, what you reckon has happened?" Nathan asked, with one of his unctuous smiles. "You two women could guess, an' guess, fer two thousand years, an' then never git in a mile o' what everybody in town is talkin' about."

Cynthia's heart sank like a plummet. It was coming — the grim, horrible revelation she had feared. But her father was subtly enjoying the blank stare in her eyes, the depth of which was beyond his comprehension. As usual, he purposely hung fire.

"What is it, Nathan?" his wife said, entreatingly. "Don't keep us waiting as you always do." She looked at Cynthia and remarked: "It's something out of the common. I can see that from the way he begins."

Porter laughed dryly. "You kin bet yore sweet lives it's out o' the common, but I hain't no hand to talk when my throat's parched dry with thirst. I cayn't drink that town water, nohow. Has any fresh been fetched?"

"Just this minute," declared his wife, and she hastened to the water-shelf in the entry, returning with a dripping gourd. "Here, drink it! You won't say a word till you are ready."

## Pole Baker

Porter drank slowly. "You may *call* that fresh water," he sneered, "but you wouldn't ef you had it to swallow. I reckon you'd call old stump water fresh ef you could git news any the quicker by it. Well, it's about Nelson Floyd."

"Nelson Floyd!" gasped Mrs. Porter. "He's gone and married Evelyn Duncan—that's my guess."

"No, it ain't that," declared Porter. "An' it ain't another Wade gal scrape that anybody knows of. The fact is nobody don't know *what* it is. Floyd went down to Atlanta Wednesday, so Mayhew says, to lay in a few articles o' stock that was out, an' to call on that new uncle o' his. He was to be back Wednesday night, without fail, to draw up some important mortgages fer the firm, an' a dozen customers has been helt over in town fer two days. They all had to go back without transactin' business, fer Floyd didn't turn up. Nor he didn't write a line, nuther. And, although old Mayhew has been firin' telegrams down thar, fust to Nelson an' later to business houses, not a thing has been heard o' the young man since last Wednesday. He hain't registered at no hotel in Atlanta. One man has been found that said he knowed Floyd by sight, an' that he had seed 'im walkin' about at night in the vilest street in Atlanta lookin' like a dead man or one plumb bereft of his senses."

Cynthia stood staring at her father with expanded eyes, and then she sat down near a window, her face averted from the others. She said nothing.

"He's crazy," said Mrs. Porter. "I've always

## Pole Baker

thought something was wrong with that man. His whole life shows it. He was an outlaw when he was a child, and when he grew up he put on high an' mighty airs, an' started to drinkin' like a lord. He'd no sooner let up on that than he got into that Wade trouble, an'—"

"Some think he was drugged, an' maybe put out of the way on the sly," said Porter, bluntly. "But I don't know. Thoughts is cheap."

"Hush, Nathan!" Mrs. Porter said, under her breath, for Cynthia had risen, and without looking to the right or left was moving from the room. "This may kill that poor child."

"Kill her, a dog's hind foot!" Porter sneered. "To be a woman yorse'f, you are the porest judge of 'em I ever seed. You women are so dead anxious to have some man die fer you that you think the same reckless streak runs in yore own veins. You all said Minnie Wade had tuck powdered glass when she was sick that time an' was goin' to pass in 'er checks on this feller's account, but she didn't die fer him, nor fer Thad Pelham, nor the two Thomas boys, nor Abe Spring, nor none o' the rest."

"You ought to be ashamed of speaking of your own child in the same breath with that girl," said Mrs. Porter, insincerely, her eyes anxiously on the door through which Cynthia had gone.

"I hain't bunchin' 'em together at all," Porter declared. "I was only tryin' to keep you from layin' in a burial outfit that may go out o' fashion 'fore Cynthy wants to use it. You watch 'er an' you'll see 'er pick up in a day or so. I've seed widows wear black so heavy that the dye in the

## Pole Baker

goods seemed to soak into the'r skins an' drip off'n the'r eyelashes, an' them same women was wearin' red stockin's an' flirtin' em at another fool inside of a month."

"You don't know what you are talking about," responded Mrs. Porter. "It is going hard with her, but I really hope Floyd 'll not come back to Springtown. I don't feel safe with him around."

"You don't want 'im here," sneered Porter, "but yo're dead sure his absence is a-goin' to lay our only child under the sod. That's about as sensible as the stand a woman takes on most questions. As fer me, I confess I'm sorter upset. I'd about made up my mind that our little gal was goin' to yank that chap an' his boodle into this family before long, but it looks like I was off in my calculations. To look at her now, a body wouldn't think she was holdin' the drivin'-reins very tight. But come what may, storm, hail, wind, rain, or sunshine an' fine crops, I'll be the only one, I reckon, in this house that will sleep sound to-night. An' that's whar you are all a set o' fools. A person that loses sleep wonderin' whether another person is dead or alive mought be in better business, in this day and time, when just *anybody* is liable to drap dead in the'r tracks. La, me! What you got fer dinner? I smell some'n' a-cookin'."


And Porter went into the kitchen, got down on his knees at the stove, and looked into it.

"That's all right," he said to himself, with a chuckle, "but she hain't put half enough gravy on it, an' ef I hadn't a-been here to 'a' turned it, it 'ud not 'a' got cooked clean through. If it's tough I'll

## Pole Baker

raise a row. I told 'em to sell the tough 'uns. What's the use o' raisin' hens ef you have to eat the scrubs an' don't git half-pay fer the ones you send to market?"

## XXVII

 WEEK went by. To Cynthia its days were veritable months of mental torture. Porter came in one day at sundown from the village. As usual, he had something to say regarding the all-absorbing topic of Nelson Floyd's mysterious disappearance. Through the day neighbors had been in with many vague and groundless rumors, all of which were later discredited, but Nathan Porter, sardonic old observer that he was, usually got nearer the facts than any one else, and in consequence he was always listened to.

"What's anybody heard now?" his wife asked him, as he came through the gate to where she and Cynthia sat on the porch.

"They've heard a lots," he said. "Among other things, it's finally leaked out that Lee's surrendered an' the niggers is all declared free. Some say George Washington has jest crossed the Delaware in a tippy-canoe, an' that Napoleon discovered America, but I doubt it. What I want to know is whether supper is ready or not."

"No, it isn't," Mrs. Porter made haste to inform him, "but it will be in a few minutes. The table's set an' all is ready, except the bread isn't quite done. Now, what have you heard in town?"



## Pole Baker

"A body kin hear a lots," Porter drawled out. "The trouble is to keep from listenin' to so much. People are standin' as thick about Mayhew & Floyd's shebang as flies over a fresh ginger-cake. You two are the only women in the county that hain't been thar, an' I'm proud of the distinction. Old Mrs. Snodgrass mighty nigh had a fisticuff fight to retain her corner in the store, whar she's had 'er distributin'-office fer the last week. Joe Peters needed the space. He tried to put a coop o' chickens thar, but you bet the chickens had to go some'rs else. Mrs. Snod' said she was gittin' hard o' hearin', an' ef she wasn't right thar in the front she wouldn't git a thing till it was second-handed."

"Oh, I get out of all patience with you," cried Mrs. Porter. "Why does it take you so long to get to a point?"

"The truth is, thar ain't any rale developments as I kin see," Porter gave in, reluctantly. "Old Mayhew, though, is back from Atlanta. He sets thar, as yaller as a pumpkin, without much to say. He's got a rope tied to every nickel he owns, an' he sees absolute ruin ahead o' the firm. He's depended on Nelson Floyd's popularity an' brains to keep things a-goin' so long that now he's like a loaded wagon runnin' downhill without a tongue, swingle-tree, or hold-back strop. You see, ef Nelson Floyd is dead, or put out o' the way—accordin' to Mrs. Snodgrass, who heard a Darley lawyer say it—why the young man's intrust in the business will slide over to his new kin—a receiver will have to be appointed an' Mayhew closed up. Mrs. Snod' is authority fer the statement that Floyd's uncle has

## Pole Baker

connived agin the boy to git his pile, an' bluffed 'im in the head with a sock full o' sand or some'n' equally as deadly. I dunno. I never knowed her to be right about anything, an' I hain't a-goin' to believe Floyd's dead till the report comes from some other direction. But this much seems to have foundation in fact: Mayhew *did* go down; he *did* make inquiries of the police; an' some *say*—now, mind you, I hain't a-standin' fer this—some say he paid out solid coin to git expert detectives a-holt o' the matter. They say the detectives run across a low-class hotel out in the edge o' town whar a feller answerin' Floyd's description had come in the night after the boy left here an' axed fer a room. They say he was lookin' awful—like he had been on a big jag, an' when they give 'im the pen to register he studied a minute an' then throwed it at the clerk, an' told 'im he didn't have no name to sign, an' turned an' stalked out. That was the last seed of 'im."

"An' that's all you heard," said Mrs. Porter, in disgust.

"All but one thing more," Porter replied. "Folks about here that has missed Pole Baker fer the last three days 'lowed he was off on another bender, but he was down thar in Atlanta nosin' around tryin' to find Floyd. Old Mayhew paid his expenses. He said Pole had a longer head on 'im than any detective in the bunch. Pole got back about two hours ago, but what he discovered not even Mrs. Snod' knows. Him an' Mayhew had the'r heads clamped together in the rear end o' the store fer an hour, but Joe Peters helt the crowd back, an' thar it stands."

"Pig-oop-pig-oo! Pig-oop-pig-oo!" The mellow,

## Pole Baker

resonant sound floated to them on the still air. Porter smiled.

"That's Pole now callin' his hogs," he said, laconically. "The blamed fool told me t'other day he was goin' to fatten them pigs on buttermilk, but that sort o' fat won't stick any more 'n whiskey bloat on a reformed drunkard. By the time he drives 'em to market they'll look as flabby as a ripe tomato with the inside squashed out. Speakin' o' hogs, I want you-uns to fry me a piece o' that shuck-sausage on the top shelf in the smoke-house. You'd better go git it now. Swallowin' all that gush in town has made me want some'n' solid."

When her mother and father had gone into the house Cynthia hastened across the fields through the gathering dusk in the direction of Pole Baker's voice. He would tell her, she was sure, if anything of importance had turned up concerning Floyd, and she could not bear the thought of another night of suspense.

Presently, through the dusk, she saw Pole at his hog-pen in the edge of a little thicket behind his cottage.

"Pig-oop-pig-oo!" she heard him calling. "Dern yore lazy hides, ef you don't come on I'll empty this bucket o' slop on the ground an' you kin root fer it. I've mighty nigh ripped the linin' out o' my throat on yore account." Then he descried Cynthia coming towards him over the dew-damp grass and he paused, leaning on the rail-fence, his eyes resting expectantly on her.

"Oh, it's you, little sister!" he exclaimed, pleasantly. "That's sorter foolish o' you gittin' them

## Pole Baker

little feet o' yore'n wet in this dew. It may settle on yore lungs an' keep you from j'inin' in the singin' Sunday."

"I want to see you," Cynthia said, in a voice that shook. "I heard you calling your hogs, and thought I'd catch you here."

"Well, little sister, I hain't very nice-lookin' in this old shirt an' pants of many colors, like Joseph's coat, but every patch was sewed on by the fingers o' the sweetest, most patient little woman God ever made, an' I hain't ashamed of 'em; but she is—God bless 'er!—an' she'd have a spasm ef she knowed I talked to you in 'em."

"My father says you went down to Atlanta," Cynthia said, falteringly, "and I thought—"

"Yes, I went down." Pole avoided her fixed stare.

"You went to see if you could learn anything of Mr. Floyd's whereabouts, didn't you?"

"Yes, I did, little sister. I hain't a-talkin' much. Mayhew says it's best to sorter lie low until some'n' accurate is found out, an' while I did my level best down thar, I've got to acknowledge I'm as much in the dark as anybody else. In fact, I'm mighty nigh bothered to death over it. Nelson, poor boy, seems to have disappeared clean off'n the face o' the earth. The only thing I have to build on is the fact that— an' I hate to say it, little sister—the fact that he evidently *did* start to drinkin' again. He told me once that he wasn't plumb sure o' hisse'f, an' that any big trouble or despair might overthrow his resolutions. Now, he's been drinkin', I reckon—an' what could 'a' been his trouble? I went three times

## Pole Baker

to his uncle's, but the doctors wouldn't let me see 'im. The old man's broke down with nervous prostration from business troubles, an' they are afeard he's goin' to kick the bucket. Comin' back on the cars—"

Pole's voice died away. He crossed and re-crossed his hands on the fence. He avoided her steady stare. His massive eyebrows met on his wrinkled forehead. It was as if he were suffering inward pain. "I say—as I set in the train on the way back tryin' an' tryin' to find some explanation, the idea come to me that—since trouble was evidently what upset Nelson—that maybe you mought be able to throw some light on it."

"*Me*, Mr. Baker?"

Pole hung his head; he spat slowly. Was she mistaken, or had he actually turned pale? Was it that, or a trick of her vision in the vague starlight?

"Little sister," he said, huskily, "you could trust me with yore life. I'd die rather than—than not stand to you in anything on earth. You see, if you happened to know any reason why Nelson Floyd—" Pole was interrupted by the loud grunting and squealing of his drove of hogs as they rushed round the fence-corner towards him. "Wait," he said—"wait till I pour the'r feed in the trough."

He took up the pail and disappeared for a moment behind the cow-house.

Cynthia felt a great lump of wondering suspense in her throat. What could he mean? What was coming? She had never seen Pole act so strangely before. Presently he came back to her, holding the dripping paddle with which he had stirred the

## Pole Baker

dregs in the bottom of his slop-bucket. He leaned over the fence again.

"You see, it's this away, little sister," he began, lamely. "You an' Nelson—that is, you an' him was sorter runnin' together. He went with you, I reckon, more, on the whole, than with any other young lady in this section, an', you see, ef anybody was in a position to know any particular trouble or worry he had, you mought be that one."

"But I'm afraid I don't know anything of the kind," she said, wonderingly, her frank eyes resting blankly on his face.

"I see you don't understand me," he went on. "The God's truth is that I hain't no hand to talk about delicate matters to a young gal, an' you above all, but I want to *know*—I want *some'n'* to build on. I don't know how to put what I want to ax. Maybe I'm away—away off, an' will want to kill myse'f fer even dreamin' that—but—well, maybe you'll git at what I mean from this. You see, I run in the room on you an' my wife not long ago an' ketched Sally an' you a-cryin' over some'n' or other you'd confided to 'er, an' then other things of a like nature has crapped up lately, an'—"

"I don't understand you, Mr. Baker," said Cynthia, anxiously, when she saw he was going no further. "I really don't. But I assure you, I'm ready to tell you anything."

"Ah! Are you? Well, I started to say Sally don't cry over other folks' matters unless they are purty sad, an' you know at the time you refused to tell me what yore trouble was. Maybe you ain't

## Pole Baker

ready yet, little sister. But could you tell me, right out plain, what ailed you that day?"

Cynthia stared and then dropped her glance to the ground.

"I don't see that it would help in the matter," she said, awkwardly.

"Well, maybe it wouldn't," he declared, in despair; "an' I reckon thar are things one woman would tell another woman that she wouldn't speak of to a man."

"I guess that's so," said Cynthia, still perplexed over the turn the conversation had taken and yet firm in her determination to say nothing that would involve Mrs. Baker's secret.

"Well, maybe you won't mind it much ef I put it this away," Pole continued. "Now, remember, you don't have to say yes or no unless you want to. Little sister, I'll put it this away: ef Nelson Floyd was to never come back here again, could you, as—as a good, true woman—could you conscientiously marry another man? Could you with a clear conscience, I mean, before God, ever marry another man? Thar, it's out! Could you?"

Cynthia started. She looked down. She was silent. Her color rose.

"Now, mind," Pole said, suddenly, "you don't *have* to answer unless you want to. No man's got a right to hem a weak, excited woman up in a corner and get at her heart's secrets."

"Would it do any good for you to know that, Mr. Baker?" the girl said, in a low voice.

"I think so, little sister."

"Well, then"—she turned her face away—"I

## Pole Baker

don't think I'd ever want to marry any other living man."

"Oh, my God!" Pole averted his face, but not before she had seen its writhing torture. She stared at him in astonishment, and, to avoid her eyes, he lowered his head to his arms, which were folded on the top rail of the fence. Fully a minute passed; still he did not look up. She saw his broad shoulders rising and falling as if he were trying to subdue a torrent of emotion. She laid her hand firmly on his arm.

"Tell me what you mean," she suddenly demanded. "I want to know. This has gone far enough. What do you mean?"

He raised a pair of great, bleary eyes to hers. He started to speak, but his voice hung in his throat. Tightening her clasp on his arm she repeated her demand.

"I see through it now," he found voice to say, huskily. "I don't mean to say Nelson Floyd is afeard o' man, beast, nor devil when it comes to a *just* encounter, but he knows now that ef me an' him was to come face to face one of us ud have to die, an' he's man enough not to want to kill me in sech a cause. I gave 'im due warnin'. I told 'im the day he drove you to bush-arbor meetin' that ef he tuck advantage o' you I'd kill 'im as shore as God give me the strength. I knowed whar that stormy night was spent, but I refused to believe the wust. I give 'im the benefit o' that doubt, but now since you tell me with your own lips that—"

"Oh! Oh! *Oh!*" The cry burst from her lips as if she were in sudden pain. "I don't mean *that*.



## Pole Baker

Why, I'm a *good* girl, Mr. Baker! I'm a good girl!"

Pole leaned over the fence and laid his big, quivering hands on her shoulders. "Thank God!" he gulped, his eyes flashing with joy. "Then I've still got my little sister an' I've got my friend. Thank God! thank God!"

Cynthia stood for a moment with hanging head, and then with a deep sigh she turned to go away. He climbed over the fence and caught up with her, the light of a new fear now in his eyes, its fire in his quickened pulse.

"I see you ain't never goin' to forgive me in the world fer sayin' what I did," he said, humbly; "but God knows I wasn't thinkin' wrong o' you. It was him, damn 'im!—his hot-blooded natur', an' a lots o' circumstances that p'inted jest one way. I ain't more 'n human, little sister, an' through that I've offended you beyond forgiveness."

"A woman learns to bear a great many things," Cynthia said. "My mother and others have hardened me so that I scarcely feel what you said as any other pure-minded woman might. Then—then—" She faced him squarely, and her voice rang out sharply. "We don't know—you don't—I don't know whether he is alive or—" Her words failed her, a sob, dry and deep, shook her from head to foot. "Don't curse him as you did just now, Mr. Baker; you may be cursing a dead man who, himself, was only human. But I know what he was—I saw his real and higher nature, and, as it struggled for growth in good and bad soil, it was the most beautiful flower God ever made. He can't be

## Pole Baker

dead—he *must* not be dead. I—I could not bear that. Do you hear me? Call me what you will for my imprudent conduct with him, but don't admit that bare possibility for one instant—even in your thoughts. Don't do it, I say!"

Pole gulped down his tense emotion. "I'll tell you what I'll do, little sister," he proposed. "Promise me you'll overlook what I said just now, an' I'll work these here hands"—he held them up in the starlight—"to the naked bone; I'll use this here brain"—he struck his broad brow with a resounding slap—"till it withers in the endeavor to fetch 'im back safe an' sound, ef you'll jest forgive me."

"Forgive you!" She laughed harshly and tossed her head. "That's already done. More than that, I want to tell you that I've always looked on you as a brother. You made me love you a long time ago by your gentleness and respect for women."

"Oh, little sister," Pole cried, "I don't deserve that!"

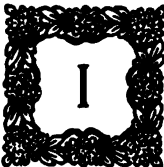
"Yes, you do; but find him—find him, and bring him back."

"All right, little sister; I'll do my best."

He stood still and watched her hurry away through the darkness.

"Poor little trick," he sighed. "I was countin' on that one thing to explain Nelson's absence. Since it ain't that, what the hell is it, unless he's been sandbagged down thar in Atlanta an' put out o' the way?"

## XXVIII

T was quite dark when Pole went into the cottage. There was a fire in the little sitting-room, and by its light he could see his wife through the open door of the next room as she quietly moved about. He paused in the door-way and whispered:

"Are the children asleep, Sally?"

"Yes, an' tucked away." She came to him with a cautious step, and looked up into his face trustingly. "Little Billy kept askin' fer papa, papa, papa! He said he jest wasn't goin' to sleep anywhar except in his own place in yore lap."

Pole went to the children's bed, looked down at the row of yellow heads for a moment, then suddenly bent and took the eldest boy into his arms.

"You goose!" Mrs. Baker exclaimed. "I'm sorry I said what I did. You'll spile 'im to death. Thar, I knowed he'd wake up! It's jest what you wanted."

"Did you want yore papa?" Pole said, in cooing tones of endearment. "Well, Billy-boy, papa's got you, an' he ain't a-goin' to let no booger git you, nuther. Thar now, go back to sleep." And in a big arm-chair before the fire Pole sat and rocked back and forth with the child's head on his shoulder.

## Pole Baker

"Whar've you been, papa?" Billy asked, sliding his arm around Pole's rough, sunbrowned neck and pressing his face to his father's.

"To feed the hogs, Billy-boy."

"But you never took so long before," argued the child.

"I had to watch 'em eat, Billy-boy—eat, eat, eat, Billy-boy! They hadn't had anything since mornin' except roots, an' snags, an' pusley weeds, an' it was a purty sight to watch 'em stick the'r snouts in that slop. Now, go to sleep. Here we go—here we go—across the bridge to Drowsy Town."

In a moment the child was sleeping soundly and Pole bore him tenderly back to bed. As he straightened up in the darkened room his wife was beside him.

"I declare you are a *good* man," she said—"the best-hearted, tenderest man in the world, Pole Baker!"

He looked at her steadily for an instant, then he said:

"Sally, I want you to do me a special favor."

"What is it, Pole?" Her voice was full of wonder.

"Sally, now don't laugh at me, but I want you to go put on a piece o' red ribbon, an' let yore hair hang down yore back loose like you used to. Fix it that away an' then come in to the fire."

"Pole, yo're foolish!" Mrs. Baker was really pleased, and yet she saw no reason for his whim.

"You do as I ax you, an' don't be long about it, nuther."

He turned back into the firelight, and, watching him cautiously from the adjoining room, Mrs.

## Pole Baker

Baker saw him straightening out his shirt and brushing his coarse hair. Then, to her further surprise, she saw him take down his best coat from its peg on the wall and put it on. This was followed by a dusting of his rough shoes with a soiled, red handkerchief. In great wonder, Sally, with her hair loose on her shoulders, looked into the room.

"You ain't in earnest about that—that red ribbon, are you, Pole?" she faltered.

"Yes, I am," he answered, without lifting his eyes from the fire. "I mean exactly what I say."

"All right, then, I'll do it, but I don't see a bit o' sense in it," she retorted. "It's about our bedtime, an' I know in reason that we ain't a-goin' nowhar at this time o' night an' leave the childern by the'r-selves."

Still Pole did not look up.

"You go an' do as I tell you," he repeated, a flush of growing embarrassment on his face.

Presently Mrs. Baker came in, even redder and more confused than he.

"Pole, what in the name o' common-sense—"

But he was gallantly placing a chair for her in front of the fire near his own. "Take a seat," he said, bowing and motioning downward with his hands. "When you stood in the door jest then, lookin' fer all the world like you did away back in our courtin'-day, I come as nigh as peas callin' you 'Miss Sally.' Gee whiz! It's Mrs. Baker now—ain't it? How quar that sounds when a body looks back!"

"Pole," she asked, as she sat down wonderingly, "are you goin' some'rs at this time o' night?"

"No, it ain't that," he said, awkwardly—"it

## Pole Baker

ain't that, Sally. It ain't meetin', nor singin'-school, nor a moonlight buggy-ride. 'Tain't none o' them old, old things." Pole crossed his long legs and leaned back in his chair. "I know in reason that you are a-goin' to laugh at me, an' say I'm plumb crazy, but it's this away, Sally: some'n's jest happened that's set me to thinkin', an' it occurred to me that I wasn't half thankful enough to the Almighty fer all His many blessin's, an'—"

"Pole"—Mrs. Baker was misled as to his meaning—"somebody's been talkin' religion to you. You want to begin holdin' family prayer ag'in, I reckon. Now, looky' here, ef you do, I want you to keep it up. I feel wuss ever'time you start in an' break off."

"'Tain't that, nuther," Pole said, eying the red chunks under the fire-logs. "Sally, thar ortn't to be no secret betwixt man an' wife. I had a talk with Cynthia Porter out at the hog-pen jest now about Nelson Floyd, an' the way she talked an' acted worked on me powerful. Seein' the way she feels about her sweetheart started me to thinkin' how awful I'd feel without you. An' with that come the feelin' that, somehow—somehow or other, Sally—me 'n' you ain't jest pine-blank the way we used to be, an' I believe thar's a screw loose. I'd liter'ly die ef I didn't have you, an' I've been spittin' in the face o' Providence by the careless way I've been actin'. Now, Sally, I want you jest to set right thar, an' let's forget about them towheads in the next room, an' try an' forget all I've made you suffer fust an' last, an' let's git back—let's git back, Sally, to the old sweetheart-time. I know I'm

## Pole Baker

tough, an' a sorry cuss before God an' man, but I've got the same heart a-beatin' in me to-night that was in me away back on Holly Creek. In this firelight you look as plump an' rosy an' bright-eyed as you did then, an' with that red ribbon at yore neck, an' yore hair down yore back, I feel—well, I feel like gittin' down on my knees an' beggin' you, like I did that time, not to take Jim Felton, but to give me a showin'. I wonder"—Pole's voice broke, and he covered his mouth impulsively with his hand—"I wonder ef it's too late to ax you to give me a chance to prove myself a good husband an' a father to them thar childern."

"Oh, Pole, stop!" Mrs. Baker cried out, as if in pain. "I won't let you set thar an' run yorese'f down, when you are the best-hearted man in this state. What is a little spree now an' then compared to the lot o' some pore women that git kicked an' cuffed, with never a tender word from the'r husbands. Pole, as the Lord is my judge, I kin honestly say that I—I almost want you *jest like you are*. Some men don't drink, but they hain't got yore heart an' gentle way, an' ef I had to take my choice over an' over ag'in, I'd choose a man like you every time."

She rose suddenly, and with a face full of pent-up emotion she left the room. She returned in a moment.

"I thought I heard the baby wakin'," she said.

He caught her hand and pulled her gently down into her chair. "Yo're a liar, Sally," he said, huskily. "You know yo're a-lyin'. You went out to wipe yore eyes. You didn't want me to see you cry."

## Pole Baker

She made no denial, and he put his rough hand, with a reverent touch, on her hair.

"It ain't quite as heavy as it was," he said. "Nor so fluffy. I reckon that's beca'se you keep it bound up so tight. When I fust tuck a shine to you, you used to run about them old hills as wild as a deer, an' the wind kept it tousled. Do you remember the day it got full o' cockleburs an' I tried to git 'em out? La me! I was all of a tremble. The Lord knows I never thought then that sech a sweet, scared, rosy little thing ud ever keep house fer me an' cook my grub an' be a mother to my childern. I never dreamt, then, that instead o' bein' grateful fer the blessin', I'd go off weeks at a time an' lie in a gutter, leavin' you to walk the floor in agony—sometimes with a nursin' baby an' not a scrap to eat. No, I never—"

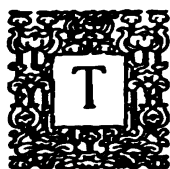
"Hush, Pole!" With a sob, half of joy, half of sadness, Mrs. Baker put her hand over his mouth and pressed her face against his. "Hush, hush, hush!"

"But, thank God, I hope that day is over," he said, taking her hand from his lips. "I've passed through a great crisis, Sally. Some'n' you don't know about—some'n' you may *never* know about—that happened right here in these mountains, but it may prove to be my turnin'-p'int."

His wife looked uneasily at the fire. "It's gittin' late, Pole," she said. "We'd better go to bed."



## XXIX

HE following evening was balmy and moonlit. Hillhouse was at Porter's just after supper, seated on the porch in conversation with Mrs. Porter.

"Yes, I believe I'd not ask her to see you to-night," she was advising him. "The poor girl seems completely fagged out. She tries to do as much about the house as usual, but it seems to tire her more. Then she doesn't eat heartily, and I hear her constantly sighing."

"Ah, I see," Hillhouse said, despondently.

"Yes," the old woman pursued, "I suppose if you finally get her to marry you, you'll have to put up with the memory that she *did* have a young girl's fancy for that man, Brother Hillhouse. But she wasn't the only one. The girls all liked him, and he did show a preference for her."

"Has she—has she heard the latest news—the very latest?" Hillhouse asked, anxiously. "Has she heard the report that Henry A. Floyd told Mr. Mayhew he had met Nelson and revealed that awful news about his parentage?"

"Oh yes; Mrs. Snodgrass came in with that report this morning. She knew as well as anything that Cynthia was excited, and yet she sat in the parlor and went over and over the worst parts of it,

## Pole Baker

watching the girl like a hawk. Cynthia got up and left the room. She was white as death and looked like she would faint. Mrs. Snodgrass hinted at deliberate suicide. She declared a young man as proud and high-strung as Nelson Floyd would resort to that the first thing. She said she wouldn't blame him one bit after all he's suffered. Well, just think of it, Brother Hillhouse! Did you ever hear of anybody being treated worse? He's been tossed and kicked about all his life, constantly afraid that he wasn't quite as respectable as other folks. And then all at once he was taken up and congratulated by the wealth and blood around him on his high stand—and then finally had to have this last discovery rammed in his face. Why, that's enough to drive any proud spirit to desperation! I don't blame him for getting drunk. I don't blame him, either, for not wanting to come back to be snubbed by those folks. But what I *do* want is fer him not to drag me and mine into his trouble. When my girl marries, I want her to marry some man that will be good to her, and I want him to have decent social standing. Even if Floyd's alive, if I can help it, Cynthia shall never marry him—never!"

"Does Miss Cynthia believe," ventured the preacher, "that Floyd has killed himself?"

"I don't think she believes that, *quite*," was Mrs. Porter's reply; "but she doesn't seem to think he'll ever come back to Springtown. Don't you worry, Brother Hillhouse. She'll get over this shock after a while, and then she'll appreciate your worth and constancy. If I were you, I'd not press my claim right now."

## Pole Baker

"Oh, I wouldn't think of such a thing!" Hillhouse stroked a sort of glowing resignation into his chin, upon which a two-days beard had made a ragged appearance. "I've been awfully miserable, Sister Porter, but this talk with you has raised my hopes."

Mrs. Porter rose with a faint smile. "Now, you go home and write another good sermon like that last one. I watched Cynthia out of the corner of my eye all through it. That idea of its being our duty to bear our burdens cheerfully—no matter how heavy they are—seemed to do her a lot of good."

The color came into Hillhouse's thin face, and his eyes shone. "The sermon I have in mind for next Sunday is on the same general line," he said. "I'm glad she listened. I was talking straight at her, Sister Porter. I'm not ashamed to admit it. I've been unable to think of anything but her since—since Floyd disappeared."

"You are a good man, Brother Hillhouse"—Mrs. Porter was giving him her hand—"and somehow I feel like you will get all you want, in due time, remember—in due time."

"God bless you, sister," Hillhouse said, earnestly, and, pressing the old woman's hand, he turned away.

### XXX



WHEN Cynthia heard the gate close behind the preacher, and from the window of her room had seen him striding away, she put a shawl over her shoulders and started out.

"Where on earth are you going?" her mother asked from the end of the porch, where she stood among the honeysuckle vines.

"I want to run across to Mrs. Baker's, just a minute," Cynthia said. "I won't be long. I'll come right back."

"I'd think you'd be afraid to do that," her mother protested, "with so many stray negroes about. Besides, it's the Bakers' bedtime. Can't you wait till to-morrow?"

"No, I want to walk, anyway," said Cynthia. "I feel as if it will do me good. I'm not afraid."

"Well, I sha'n't go to bed till you come back," Mrs. Porter gave in.

In a few minutes the girl was at the back-yard fence of Pole Baker's cottage. The door was open wide, and in the firelight Cynthia saw Mrs. Baker bending over the dining-room table.

"Oh, Mrs. Baker!" the girl called, softly.

"Who's that? Oh, it's you, Cynthia!" and the older woman came out into the moonlight, brushing

## Pole Baker

her white apron with her hand. She leaned over the fence. "Won't you come in?"

"No, I promised mother I'd be right back. I thought maybe you could tell me if Mr. Baker had heard anything yet."

"I'm sorry to say he hain't," replied the little woman, sadly. "Him and Mr. Mayhew has been working all sorts of ways, and writing constant letters to detectives and the mayors of different cities, but everything has failed. He came in just now looking plumb downhearted."

Cynthia took a deep breath. Her lips quivered as if she had started to speak and failed.

"But, la me! I haven't give up," Mrs. Baker said, in a tone of forced lightness. "He'll come home all safe and sound one of these days, Cynthia. I have an idea that he's just mad at his ill-luck all round, and, right now, doesn't care what folks about here think. He'll git over all that in due time and come back and face his trouble like other men have done. It's a bitter pill fer a proud young man to swallow, but a body kin git used to most anything in time."

"I'm afraid he's never coming home," Cynthia said, in rigid calmness. "He once told me if he ever had any great trouble he would be tempted to drink again. Mr. Baker thinks he's been drinking, and in that condition there is no telling what has happened to him."

"Well, let me tell you some'n'—let me give you a piece of sound advice," said Mrs. Baker. "It's unaxed; but I'm a sufferin' woman, an' I'm a-goin' to advise you as I see fit, ef you never speak to me

## Pole Baker

ag'in. Ef whiskey is keepin' Nelson Floyd away, an' he does come back an' wants to marry you, don't you take 'im. Tear 'im from yore young heart 'fore the roots o' yore love git too big an' strong to pull out. It may not be whiskey that's keepin' 'im away. He may 'a' taken a dram or two at the start an' be livin' sober somewhar now; or, then ag'in, as you say, some'n' may 'a' happened to 'im; but, anyhow, don't you resk livin' with 'im, not ef he has all the money on earth. Money won't stick to a drinkin' man no longer than the effects of a dram, an' in the mind of sech a fellow good intentions don't amount to no more than a swarm o' insects that are born an' die in a day. Of course, some men *do* reform. I'm prayin' right now that the awful thing that happened t'other night to Pole will be his turnin'-p'int, but I dunno. I'll walk on thin ice over a lake o' fire till I kin see further. Be that as it may, Cynthia, I can't stand by an' see another unsuspectin' woman start in on the road I've travelled—no, siree!"

"I think you are exactly right," Cynthia said, under her breath, and then she sighed deeply. "Well, good-night. I must go." She was turning away, when Mrs. Baker called to her.

"Stop, Cynthia!" she said. "You ain't mad at me, are you?"

"Not a bit in the world," Cynthia answered. "In fact, I'm grateful for your advice. I may never have a choice in such a matter, but I know you mean it for my own good."

As Cynthia entered the gate at home, her mother rose from a chair on the porch. "Now I can go to

## Pole Baker

bed," she remarked. "I have been awfully uneasy, almost expecting to hear you scream out from that lonely meadow."

"There was nothing to be afraid of, mother," and Cynthia passed on to her own room. She closed the door and lighted her lamp, and then took her Bible from the top drawer of her bureau and sat down at her table and began to read it. She read chapter after chapter mechanically, her despondent eyes doing work which never reached her throbbing brain. Presently she realized this and closed the book. Rising, she went to her window and looked across the grass-grown triangle to her mother's window. It was dark. All the other windows were so, too. The house was wrapped in slumber. She heard the clock strike nine. Really she must go to bed, and yet she knew she would not sleep, and the thought of the long, conscious hours till day-break caused her to shudder.

Perhaps twenty minutes had passed since the clock struck, when a sound suddenly fell upon her ears that thrilled every muscle in her body. It was the far-off call of a whippoorwill! Was it the cry of the real bird or an imitation—*his* imitation? She stood like a thing of stone, straining her ears for its repetition. There! There it was again, and nearer, clearer, more appealing. Ah, no creature of mere feathers and flesh could have uttered that tentative, soulful note! It was Nelson Floyd alive!—alive and wanting her—her first of all! Standing before her mirror, she tried to tie up her hair, which had fallen loose upon her shoulders, but her hands refused to do their office. Without a second's de-

## Pole Baker

liberation she sprang to her door, opened it, and ran on to the outer one. Passing through this, she glided across the porch and softly sped over the grass in the direction of the sound. She heard it again, in startling shrillness, and then, in the clear moonlight, she saw Floyd standing in front of the grape-arbor. As she drew near her heart stood still at the sight of the change which had come on him. It lay like the tracing of Death's pencil on his brow, in his emaciated features and loosely fitting, soiled, and unpressed clothing. For the first time in her life she yielded herself without resistance to his out-stretched arms. With no effort to prevent it, she allowed him to press his lips to hers. Childlike, and as if in fear of losing him again, she slid her arm round his neck and drew him tightly to her. Neither uttered a word. Thus they remained for a moment, and then he led her into the arbor and they sat down together, his arm still about her body, her head on his breast. He was first to speak.

"I was so afraid you'd not come," he panted, as if he had been walking fast. "Have you heard of my trouble?" he went on, his voice sounding strange and altered.

She nodded on his breast, not wanting to see the pain she knew was mirrored in his face.

"Oh no, surely you haven't—that is, not—not what I learned in Atlanta about my—my mother and father?"

Again she nodded, pressing her brow upward against his chin in a mute action of consolation and sympathy.



## Pole Baker

He sighed. "I didn't think anybody knew that," he said. "That is, anybody up here."

"Mr. Mayhew went down and saw your uncle," Cynthia found voice to say, finally.

"Don't call him my uncle—he's not that, except as hell gives men relatives. But I don't want to speak of him. The memory of his ashy face, glittering eyes, and triumphant tone as he hurled those facts at me is like a horrible nightmare. I'm not here to deny a thing, little girl. I came to let you see me just as I am. I fell very low. No one knows I'm here. I passed through Darley without meeting a soul I knew and walked all the way here, dodging off the road when I heard the sound of hoofs or wheels. I've come to you, Cynthia—only you. You are the only one out of this part of my life that I ever want to see again. I am not going to hide anything. After that revelation in Atlanta I sank as low as a brute. I drank and lost my head. I spent several days in New Orleans more like a demon than a human being—among gamblers, thieves, and cutthroats. Two of my companions confessed to me that they were escaped convicts put in for murder. I went on to Havana and came back again to New Orleans. Yesterday I reached Atlanta. I learned that the police had been trying to find me, and hid out. Last night, Cynthia, I was drunk again; but this morning I woke up with a longing to throw it all off, to be a man once more, and while I was thinking about it a thought came to me like a flash of light from heaven thrown clear across the black waste of hell. The thought came to me that, although I am a nobody (that name

## Pole Baker

has never passed my lips since I learned it was not my own)—the thought came to me, I say, that there was one single and only chance for me to return to manhood and obtain earthly happiness. Do you follow me, dearest?"

She raised her head and looked into his great, staring eyes.

"Not quite, Nelson," she said, softly. "Not quite."

"You see, I recalled that you, too, are not happy here at home, and, as in my case, through no fault of your own—no fault, except being born different from others around you. I remembered all you'd told me about your mother's suspicious, exacting nature, and how hard you worked at home, and how little real joy you got out of life, and then it came to me that we both had as much right to happiness as any one else—you for your hard life and I for all that I'd suffered. So I stopped drinking. I have not touched a drop to-day, although a doctor down there said I really needed a stimulant. You can see how nervous I am. I shake all over. But I am stimulated by hope—that's it, Cynthia—hope! I've come to tell you that you can make a man of me—that you have it in your power to blot out all my trouble."

"I don't see how, Nelson." Cynthia raised her head and looked into his shadowy face wonderingly.

"I've come here to ask you to leave this spot with me forever. I've got unlimited means. Even since I've been away my iron lands in Alabama and coal lands in Tennessee have sprung up marvellously in value. This business here at the store

## Pole Baker

is a mere trifle compared to other investments of mine. We could go far away where no one knows of my misfortune, and, hand-in-hand, make us a new home and new friends. Oh, Cynthia, that holds out such dazzling promise to me that, honestly, all the other fades away in contrast to it. Just to think, you'll be all mine, all mine—alone with me in the wide, wide world! I have no legal name to give you, it's true, but"—he laughed harshly—"we could put our heads together and pick a pretty one, and call ourselves by it. I once knew a man who was a foundling, and because they picked him up early in the morning he was called 'Early.' That wouldn't sound bad, would it? Mr. and Mrs. Early, from nowhere, but nice, good people. What do you say, little girl? It all rests with you now. You are to decide whether I rise or sink back again, for God knows I don't see how I could possibly give you up. I have not acted right with you all along in not declaring my love sooner, but I hardly knew my mind. It was not till that night at the mill that I began to realize how dear you were to me, but it was such a wonderful awakening that I did not speak of it as I should. But why don't you say something, Cynthia? Surely you don't love any one else—"

She drew herself quite from his embrace, but, still clasping one of his hands like an eager child, she said:

"Nelson, I don't believe I'm foolish and impetuous like some girls I know. You are asking me to take the most important step in a woman's life, and I cannot decide hastily. You have been

## Pole Baker

drinking, Nelson, you acknowledge that frankly. In fact, I would have known it anyway, for you are not like you used to be—even your voice has altered. Nelson, a man who will give way to whiskey even in great trouble is not absolutely a safe man. I'm unhappy, I'll admit it. I've suffered since you disappeared as I never dreamed a woman could suffer, and yet—and yet what you propose seems a very imprudent thing to do. When did you want me to leave?"

"A week from to-night," he said. "I can have everything ready by then and will bring a horse and buggy. I'll leave them down below the orchard and meet you right here. I'll whistle in the old way, and you must come to me. For God's sake don't refuse. I promise to grant any request you make. Not a single earthly wish of yours shall ever go unsatisfied. I *know* I can make you happy."

Cynthia was silent for a moment. She drew her hand from his clasp. "I'll promise this much," she said, in a low, firm voice. "I'll promise to bring my decision here next Friday night. If I decide to go, I suppose I'd better pack—"

"Only a very few things," he interposed. "We shall stop in New Orleans and you can get all you want. Oh, little girl, think of my sheer delight over seeing you fairly loaded down with the beautiful things you ought always to have had, and noting the wonder of everybody over your rare beauty of face and form, and to know that you are all mine, that you gave up everything for a nameless man! You will not go back on me, dearest? You won't do it, after all I've been through?"

## Pole Baker

Cynthia was silent after this burst of feeling, and he put his arm around her and drew her, slightly resisting, into his embrace.

"What is troubling you, darling?" he asked, tenderly.

"I'm worried about your drinking," she faltered. "I've seen more misery come from that habit than anything else in the world."

"But I swear to you that not another drop shall ever pass my lips," he said. "Why, darling, even with no promise to you to hold me back, I voluntarily did without it to-day, when right now my whole system is crying out for it and almost driving me mad. If I could do that of my own accord, don't you see I could let it alone forever for your sake?"

"But"—Cynthia raised her eyes to his—"between now and—and next Friday night, will you—"

"I shall be as sober as a judge when I come," he laughed, absorbing hope from her question. "I shall come to you with the clearest head I ever had—the clearest head and the lightest heart, little girl, for we are going out together into a great, mysterious, dazzling world. You will not refuse me? You are sent to me to repay me for all I've been through. That's the way Providence acts. It brings us through misery and shadows out into joy and light. My shadows have been dark, but my light—great God, did mortal ever enter light such as ours will be!"

"Well, I'll decide by next Friday night," Cynthia said; "that's all I can promise now. It is a most important matter and I shall give it a great deal of thought. I see the way you look at it."

## Pole Baker

"But, Cynthia," he cautioned her, "don't tell a soul that I've been here. They think I'm dead; let them continue to do so. Friday night just leave a note saying that you have gone off with me and that you will write the particulars later. But we won't write till we have put a good many miles behind us. Your mother will raise a lot of fuss, but we can't help that."

"I shall not mention it to any one," the girl agreed, and she rose and stood before him, half turned to go.

"Then kiss me, dearest," he pleaded, seizing her hands and holding them tight—"kiss me of your own accord; you know you never have done that, not even once, since I've known you."

"No; don't ask me to do that," she said, firmly, "for that would be absolute consent, and I tell you, Nelson, frankly, I have not yet fully decided. You must not build on it too much."

"Oh, don't talk that way, darling. Don't let me carry a horrible doubt for a whole week. Do say something that will keep up my hopes."

"All I can say is that I'll decide by Friday night," she repeated. "And if I go I shall be ready. Good-night, Nelson; I can't stay out longer."

He walked with her as far as he could safely do so in the direction of the farm-house, and then they parted without further words.


"She'll go—the dear little thing," he said to himself, enthusiastically, as he walked through the orchard. When he had climbed over the fence he paused, looked back, and shrugged his shoulders. An unpleasant thrill passed over him. It was the

## Pole Baker

very spot on which he had met Pole Baker that night and had been so soundly reprimanded for his indiscretion in quitting Nathan Porter's premises in such a stealthy manner.

Suddenly Floyd pressed his hand to his waistcoat-pocket and drew out a tiny object that glittered in the moonlight. "The engagement ring!" he exclaimed, in a tone of deep disappointment; "and I forgot to give it to her. What a fool I was, when she's never had a diamond in her life! Well"—he looked hesitatingly towards the farm-house—"it wouldn't do to call her back now. I'll keep it till Friday night. Like an idiot, I forgot, too, in my excitement, to tell her where we are to be married—that is, if she will go; but she won't desert me—I can trust her. She will be my wife—*my wife!*"

## XXXI

HE next morning, after breakfast, Mrs. Porter told her husband to harness the horse and hitch him to the buggy. "I've got some butter ready to sell," she explained, "and some few things to buy."

"You'll gain lots by it," Nathan sneered, as he reluctantly proceeded to do her bidding. "In the fust place it will take yore time fer half a day, the hoss's time fer half a day, an' the wear an' tear on the buggy will amount to more than all you git fer the butter. But that's the way women calculate. They can't see an inch 'fore the'r noses."

"I can see far enough before mine to hear you grumbling at dinner about the coffee being out," she threw back at him; "something you, with all your foresight, forgot yesterday."

"Huh, I reckon the old lady did hit me that pop!" Nathan admitted to himself as he walked away. "Fust thing I know I'll not be able to open my mouth—women are gittin' so dern quick on the trigger—an', by gum, I *did* forgit that coffee, as necessary as the stuff is to my comfort."

When Porter brought the horse and buggy around a few minutes later his wife was ready on the porch with her pail of neatly packed butter. Cynthia came



## Pole Baker

to the door, but her mother only glanced at her coldly as she took up her pail and climbed into the vehicle and grasped the reins.

Reaching Mayhew & Floyd's store, she went in and showed the butter to Joe Peters, who stood behind one of the counters.

"I want eighteen cents a pound," she said. "If towns-people won't pay it, they can't eat *my* butter. Butter for less than that is white and puffy and full of whey."

"What did you want in exchange for it, Mrs. Porter?" the clerk asked. "In trade, you know, we do better than for cash."

"I want its worth in coffee," she said, "that's all."

"We'll take it, then, and be glad to get it," Peters said, and he put the firm, yellow lumps on the scales, made a calculation with a pencil on a piece of wrapping-paper, and began to put up the coffee. Meanwhile, she looked about her. Mayhew sat at a table in the rear. The light from a window beyond him, falling on his gray head, made it look like a bunch of cotton.

"I reckon he's keeping his own books now that Nelson Floyd's away?" she said, interrogatively, to the busy clerk.

"A body mought call it book-keepin'," Peters laughed, "but it's all I can do to make out his scratchin'. He writes an awful fist. The truth is, we are terribly upset by Floyd's absence, Mrs. Porter. His friends—folks that like 'im—come fer forty miles, clean across the Tennessee line, to trade with him, and when they don't see him about they go

## Pole Baker

on with empty wagons to Darley. It's mighty nigh runnin' the old man crazy. He sees now who was butterin' his bread. Ef Nelson was to come back now the old cuss 'ud dress 'im out in purple an' fine linen an' keep 'im in a glass case."

"Do you expect Floyd to come back?" Mrs. Porter was putting the damp napkin back into her empty pail. Indifference lay in her face and voice but had not reached her nervous fingers.

"Mrs. Porter"—Peters spoke lower. He came around the counter and joined her on the threshold of the door—"I'm a-goin' to let you on to some'n' that I'm afeard to tell even the old man. The Lord knows I wouldn't have Mrs. Snodgrass an' her team git hold of it fer the world. You see, ef I was to talk too much I mought lose my job. Anyway, I don't want to express an opinion jest on bare suspicion, but I know you've got a silent tongue in yore head, an' I think I know, too, why yo're interested, an' I'm in sympathy with you an'—an' Miss—an' with all concerned, Mrs. Porter."

"You said you were going to tell me something," the old woman reminded him, her glance on the court-house across the street, her voice tense, probing, and somewhat resentful of his untactful reference to Cynthia.

"I'm a-goin' to tell you this much," said Peters, "but it's in strict confidence, Mrs. Porter. Thar has been a lot o' letters fer Floyd on all sorts o' business affairs accumulatin' here. Mayhew's been openin' 'em all an' keepin' 'em in a stack in a certain pigeon-hole of the desk. Now, I seed them letters thar jest last night when I closed the store,

## Pole Baker

an' this mornin' early, when I opened up an' was sweepin' out, I missed 'em."

"Ah, I see!" exclaimed Mrs. Porter, impulsively.

"Well, ef you do, you see more 'n me," Peters went on, "fer I don't know how it happened. It's bothered me all day. You see, I can't talk to the old man about it, fer maybe he come down here some time last night an' got 'em fer some purpose or other. An' then ag'in—well, thar is jest three keys to the house, Mrs. Porter, the one the old man has, the one I tote, an' the one Nelson Floyd tuck off with 'im."

"So you have an idea that maybe—"

"I hain't no idea about it, I tell you, Mrs. Porter, unless—unless Nelson Floyd come back here last night an' come in the store an' got his mail."

"Ah, you think he may be back?"

"I don't know that he is, you understand, but I'm a-goin' to hope that he ain't dead, Mrs. Porter. Ef thar ever was a man I loved—that is to say, downright *loved*—it was Nelson Floyd. La me! I could stand here from now till sundown an' not git through tellin' you the things he's done in my behalf. You remember—jest to mention one—that mother had to be tuck to Atlanta to Dr. Winston to have a cancer cut out. Well, she had no means, an' I didn't, an' we was in an awful plight—her jest cryin' an' takin' on day an' night in the fear o' death. Well, Nelson got onto it. He drawed me off behind the store one day—as white as a sheet, bless your soul! fer it mighty nigh scared the boy to death to be ketched at his good acts—an' he up an' told me he was goin' to pay the whole bill, but

## Pole Baker

that I mustn't tell nobody, an' I wouldn't tell you now ef mean reports wasn't out agin 'im. I hardly knowed what to do, fer I didn't want to be beholden to 'im to sech a great extent, but he made me take the money, an', as you know, mother got well ag'in. Then what did he do but raise my wages away up higher than any clerk in this part o' the state gits. That mighty nigh caused a split betwixt him an' the old man, but Nelson had his way. I tried to pay some on the debt, but he wouldn't take it. He wouldn't even let me give 'im my note; he'd always laugh an' turn it off, an' of late it sorter made 'im mad, an' I simply had to quit talkin' about it."

"He had his good side." Mrs. Porter yielded the point significantly. "I never denied that. But a man that does good deeds half the time and bad half the time gets a chance to do a sort of evil that men with worse reputations don't run across." Mrs. Porter moved away towards her buggy, and then she came back, and, looking him straight in the eye, she said, "I hardly think, Joe, the fact that those letters are missing proves that Nelson Floyd was here last night."

"You don't think so, Mrs. Porter?" Peters' face fell.

"No; Mr. Mayhew no doubt took them to look over. I understand he and Pole Baker are trying to get track of Floyd. You see, they may have hoped to get some clew from the letters."

"That's a fact, Mrs. Porter," and, grown quite thoughtful, the clerk was silent as he helped her into her buggy.

"Huh!" she said to herself, as she started off.

## **Pole Baker .**

**"Floyd's done a lot o' good deeds, has he? I've known men to act like angels to set their consciences at rest after conduct that would make the bad place itself turn pink in shame. I know your kind, Nelson Floyd, and a little of you goes a long way."**

## XXXII



RS. PORTER drove down the village street between the rows of scattered houses till she arrived at a modest cottage with a white paling fence in front and a few stunted flowers. Here she alighted. There was a hitching-post, with an old horseshoe nailed near the top for a hook, and, throwing the reins over it, she went into the yard. Some one came to a window and parted the curtains. It was Hillhouse. He turned and stepped quickly to the door, a startled expression of inquiry on his face.

"Come in, come in," he said. "Really, I wasn't looking for anybody to drop in so early in the day; and this is the first time you've ever called, Sister Porter."

With a cold nod she walked past him into the little white-walled, carpetless hall.

"You've got a parlor, haven't you?" she asked, cautiously looking around.

"Oh yes; excuse me," he stammered, and he awkwardly opened a door on the right. "Walk in, walk in. I'm awfully rattled this morning. Seeing you so sudden made me—"

"I hope the Marshall family across the street weren't watching as I got out," she broke in, as she

## Pole Baker

preceded him into the parlor. "People talk so much here, and I wanted to see you privately. Let a woman with a grown daughter go to an unmarried preacher's house and you never hear the last of it."

She sat down in a rocking-chair and looked about her, he thought, with an expression of subdued excitement. The room was most simply furnished. On the floor lay a rag carpet, with rugs of the same material. A cottage organ stood in one corner, and a round, marble-topped table in the centre of the room held a lamp and a plush-covered album. On the white walls hung family portraits, black-and-white enlarged photographs. The window looking towards the street had a green shade and white, stiffly starched lace curtains.

"Your mother and sister—are they in the house?" Mrs. Porter asked.

"No," he answered, standing in front of her. "They went over to McGill's as soon as breakfast was finished. You know their little boy got kicked by a mule yesterday."

"Yes, I heard so, and I'm glad they are not here—though you'd better tell them I came. If you don't, and the Marshalls happen to mention it to them, they might think it strange."

"You wanted to see me alone, then?" Hillhouse put out his stiff, tentative hand and drew a chair to him and sat down in it.

"Yes, I'm in trouble—great, great trouble," the old woman said, her steely glance on his face; "and to tell you the truth, I don't see how I'm going to get around it. I couldn't mention it to any one else

## Pole Baker

but you, not even Nathan nor mother. In fact, you ought to know, for it's bound to worry you, too."

"Oh, Sister Porter, what is it? Don't keep me waiting. I knew you were in some trouble when I saw your face as you came in at the gate. Is it about—"

"Of course it's about Cynthia," sighed the woman—"about her and Nelson Floyd."

"He's dead, and she—" Hillhouse began, but Mrs. Porter stopped him.

"No, that isn't it," she went on. "He's alive. He's back here."

"Oh, is that so?" Hillhouse leaned forward, his face white, his thin lips quivering.

"Yes, I'll tell you about it," went on Mrs. Porter. "Of late I've been unable to sleep for thinking of Cynthia and her actions, she's seemed so reckless and despondent, and last night I left my bed and started to creep in and see if she was asleep. I had on soft slippers and made no noise, and had just got to the end of the hall, when her door opened and she went out at the front."

"Gone? Oh, don't—don't tell me that, Mrs. Porter!"

"No, not that, quite; but wait till I am through," Mrs. Porter said, her tone hard and crisp. "When I got to the porch I saw her just disappearing in the orchard. And then I heard somebody whistling like a whippoorwill. It was Nelson Floyd. He was standing at the grape-arbor, and the two met there. They went inside and sat down, and then, as there was a thick row of rose-bushes between the house and the arbor, I slipped up behind it. I



## Pole Baker

crouched down low till I was almost flat on the ground. I heard every word that passed between them."

Hillhouse said nothing. The veins in his forehead stood out full and dark. Drops of perspiration, the dew of mental agony, appeared on his cheeks.

"Don't form hasty judgment," Mrs. Porter said. "If I ever doubted, or feared my child's weakness on that man's account, I don't now. She's as good and pure as the day she was born. In fact, I don't believe she would have gone out to meet him that way if she hadn't been nearly crazy over the uncertainty as to what had happened to him. I don't blame her; I'd have done it myself if I'd cared as much for a man as she does about him—or thinks she does."

"You say you heard what passed?" Hillhouse panted.

"Yes, and never since I was born have I heard such stuff as he poured into that poor child's ears. As I listened to his talk, one instant my heart would bleed with sympathy and the next I'd want to grab him by the throat and strangle him. He was all hell and all heaven's angels bound up in one human shape to entrap one frail human being. He went over all his suffering from babyhood up, saying he had had as much put on him as he could stand. He had come back by stealth and didn't want a soul but her to know he was here; he didn't intend ever to face the sneers of these folks and let them throw up his mother's sin to him. He'd been on a long and terrible debauch, but had sobered up and

## Pole Baker

promised to stay that way if she would run away with him to some far-off place where no soul would ever know his history. He had no end of funds, he said; he'd made money on investments outside of Springtown, and he promised to gratify every wish of hers. She was to have the finest and best in the land, and get away from a miserable existence under my roof. Oh, I hate him—poisoning her mind against the mother who nursed her!"

"He wanted her to elope!" gasped Hillhouse—"to elope with a man just off of a long drunk and with a record like that behind him—*her*, that beautiful, patient child! But what did she say?"

"At first she refused to go, as well as I could make out, and then she told him she would have to think over it. He is to meet her at the same place next Friday night, and if she decides to go between now and then she will be ready."

"Thank God, we've discovered it ahead of time!" Hillhouse said, fervently, and he got up, and, with his head hanging low and his bony hands clutched behind him over the tails of his long, black coat, he walked back and forth from the window to the door. "I tell you, Sister Porter," he almost sobbed, "I can't give her up to him. I can't, I tell you. It isn't in me. I'd die rather than have her go off with him."

"So would I—so would I, fearin' what I *now* do," Mrs. Porter said, without looking at him.

"*Fearin' what you now do?*" Hillhouse paused in front of her.

"That's what I said." The old woman raised her

## Pole Baker

eyes to his. Hillhouse sank down into his chair, nursing a new-born alarm in his lap.

"What do you mean, Sister Porter?" he asked, in a low tone.

"Why, I mean that I never heard any thoroughly rational man on earth talk just as Floyd did last night. I may be away off. I may be wronging him badly, but not once in all his tirade did he say *right in so many words* that he meant actually to marry her."

"Great God, the damnable wretch!" Hillhouse sprang again to his feet. Mrs. Porter put out her hand and caught his arm and drew him down to his chair again.

"Don't decide hastily," she urged him. "I laid awake all night trying to get it clear in my head. He had lots to say about the awful way the world had treated him, and that he felt, having no name, that he was unworthy of anybody as sweet and good as she was, but that if she would go off with him he'd feel that she had sacrificed everything for him and that that would recompense him for all he had lost. He even said that Providence sometimes worked that way, giving people a lot to bear at first, and then lifting them out of it all of a sudden."

Hillhouse leaned forward till his elbows rested on his knees and he covered his ghastly face with his hands. For a moment he was silent. Mrs. Porter could hear him breathing heavily. Suddenly he looked at her from eyes that were almost blood-shot.

"I understand him," he declared. "He fell into a

## Pole Baker

drunkard's hell, feeling that he was justified in such a course by his ill-luck, and now he has deliberately persuaded himself that both he and she would be justified in defying social customs—being a law unto themselves as it were. It is just the sort of thing a man of his erratic character would think of, and the damnable temptation is so dazzling that he is trying to make himself believe they have a right to it."

"Really, that was what I was afraid of," said Mrs. Porter, with a soft groan. "I heard him tell her that he would never be called by the name of Floyd again. Surely, a man has to have a name of some sort to get legally married, doesn't he?"

"Of course he has," said Hillhouse. "But, my God, Sister Porter, what are you going to do?"

"That's the trouble," answered the old woman. "I understand Cynthia well enough to know that she will not be coerced in the matter. She is going to think it all over, and if she decides to go with him no power on earth will stop her. She looks already better satisfied. The only thing I can see is for me to try to stir up her sympathies in some way. She's tender-hearted; she'd hate to be the cause of my suffering. We must work together, and in secret, Brother Hillhouse.

"Work together, but how?" the preacher groaned. "I can't think of a thing to do. If I appealed to her on the score of my love for her she would only balance that off by his, and all she imagines the scoundrel suffers."

"Oh, his trouble is *real* enough," Mrs. Porter declared. "I tell you that in spite of my hatred

## Pole Baker

for him, and even in spite of his cowardly insinuations against me ringing in my ears last night, I felt sorry for him. It would pierce a heart of stone to hear him talk as he did to her. If she resists, she will be a stronger woman than I would have been at her age and under the same circumstances. Pshaw! what would I have cared if I'd loved a man with all my heart and fate had deprived him of a name to give me—what would I have cared for the opinions of a little handful of people pent up here in the mountains when he was asking me to go with him out into the wide world and take my chances along with him? I don't know, Brother Hillhouse, but that I'd have gloried in the opportunity to say I was no better than he was. That's the way most women would look at it; that's the way, I'm afraid, *she* will look at it."

The preacher turned upon her, cold fury snapping in his eyes and voice. "You talk that way—*you*!" he snarled—"and you her mother! You are almost arguing that because *his* father and mother branded him as they did that he and Cynthia have a right to—to brand their—their own helpless offspring the same way. Sin can't be compromised with."

"Ah, you are right. I wasn't looking far enough ahead," Mrs. Porter acknowledged. "No, we must save her. Heaven could not possibly bless such a step as that. I want her to hear somebody talk on that line. Say, Brother Hillhouse, if I can get her to come to church to-morrow, could you not, in a roundabout way, touch on that idea?"


"God knows I am willing to try anything—anything!" the minister said, despondently. "Yes,

## Pole Baker

bring her, if she will come. She seems to listen to me. I'll do my best."

"Well, I'll bring her," Mrs. Porter promised. "Good-morning. I'd better get back. They will wonder what's keeping me."

## XXXIII

OR midsummer, the next morning was clear and cool. Nathan Porter rolled the family spring-wagon down to the creek and washed off the wheels and greased the axles.

"Your pa's getting ready to drive us to church, Cynthia," Mrs. Porter adroitly said to the girl as she was removing the dishes from the table in the dining-room. "I wish you'd go with me. I hate to sit there with just your pa."

There was an instant's hesitation visible in Cynthia's sudden pause in her work and the startled lift of her eyebrows. Then she said:

"All right, mother, if you want me to, I'll go."

"Well, then, go get out your white muslin and flowered hat. They become you more than anything you wear."

Without further words Cynthia left the room, and Mrs. Porter walked out into the hall and stood in the front door-way.

"Somehow, I imagine," she mused, "that she was thinking it would be her last time at our church. I don't know what makes me think so, but she had exactly that look in her face. I do wish I could go in and tell mother all about it, but she's too old and childish to act with caution. I can't go to Nathan,

## Pole Baker

either, for he'd laugh at me; he'd not only do that, but he'd tell it all over the country and drive Cynthia to meet Floyd ahead of time. No, no; I must do the best I can with Mr. Hillhouse's help. He loves her; he'd make her a good, safe husband, too, while that dare-devil would most likely tire of her in a short time, and take to drinking and leave her high and dry in some far-off place. No, Floyd won't do to risk."

The service was not well attended that morning, owing to a revival in progress at Darley. Reports of the good music and high religious excitement had drawn away a goodly number of Hillhouse's parishioners. But, considering the odd nature of the discourse he had planned, this was perhaps in the young preacher's favor. Indeed, as he sat in his high-backed chair behind the little wooden stand, which held a ponderous open Bible, a glass pitcher of water, and a tumbler, Mrs. Porter, as she and Cynthia entered and took their usual places, thought he looked as if he had not slept the preceding night. His skin was yellow, his hair stood awry, and his eyes had a queer, shifting expression. Had his wily old ally doubted that he intended to fulfil his promise to publicly touch on the matter so near to them both, she could do so no longer after he had risen and stood unconsciously swaying from side to side, as he made some formal announcements in harsh, rigid tones. Indeed, he had the appearance of a man who could have talked of only one thing, thought of only one thing, that to which his whole being was nailed. His subject was that of the sins of the fathers being visited upon their children,



## Pole Baker

even to the third and fourth generations. And Mrs. Porter shrank guiltily as his almost desperate voice rang out in the still room. How was it possible for those around not to suspect—to know—that she had instigated the sermon and brought her unsuspecting child there to be swerved by it from the dangerous course she was pursuing? In former sermons Hillhouse had unfailingly allowed his glance to rest on Cynthia's face, but on this occasion he looked everywhere but at her. As he proceeded, he seemed to take on confidence in his theme; his tone rose high, clear, and firm, and quivered in the sheer audacity of his aim. He showed, from that lesson, the serious responsibility resting on each individual—each prospective mother and father. Then, all at once, it dawned on the congregation that Floyd's misfortune had inspired the discourse, and each man and woman bent breathlessly forward that they might not lose a word. The picture was now most clear to their intelligences. And seeing that they understood, and were sympathetically following him, Hillhouse swept on, the bit of restraint between his clinched teeth, to direct, personal reference.

"We can take it home to ourselves, brothers and sisters," he went on, passionately. "Even in our own humble, uneventful lives here in the mountains, out of the great current of worldliness that flows through the densely populated portions of our land, we have seen a terrible result of this failure of man to do his duty to his posterity. Right here in our midst the hand of God has fallen so heavily that the bright hopes of sterling youth are crushed

## Pole Baker

out completely. There was here among us a fine specimen of mental and physical manhood, a young soul full of hope and ambition. There was not a ripple on the calm surface of that life, not a cloud in the clear sky of its future, when, without warning, the shadow of God's hand spread over it. The awful past was unrolled—one man and woman, for selfish, personal desires, were at the root of it all. Some shallow thinkers claim that there is no hell, neither spiritual nor material. To convince such individuals I would point the scornful finger of proof to the agony of that young man. Are they—that selfish couple—enjoying the bliss of the redeemed and he, the helpless product of their sin, suffering as you know he must be suffering? In this case the tangible and visible must establish the verity of the vague and invisible. They are paying the debt—somewhere, somehow—you may count on that."

Mrs. Porter, with bated breath, eyed Cynthia askance. To her astonishment a flush had risen into the girl's cheeks, and there was in her steady eye something like the thin-spread tear of deep and glorified emotion, as she sat with tightly clasped hands, her breast tumultuously heaving. The house was very still, so still that the rustling of the leaves in the trees near the open windows now and then swept like the soft sighing of grief-stricken nature through the room. Hillhouse, a baffled, almost hunted look on his gaunt face, paused to take a sup of water, and for one instant his eyes met Cynthia's as he wiped his mouth on his handkerchief and with trembling hands returned it to his pocket. Mrs. Porter was conscious of the im-

## Pole Baker

pression that he had not quite carried the subject to its logical climax, and was wondering how it had happened, when Hillhouse almost abruptly closed his discourse. He sat down, as if crushed by the weight of defeat, and looked steadily and despondently at the floor, while the congregation stood and sang the doxology. Then he rose and, with hands out-stretched as stiffly as those of a wired skeleton, he pronounced the benediction.

As they were turning to leave, Cynthia and her mother faced old Nathan, who stood waiting for them.

"Hillhouse don't look one bit well to-day," he observed, as they were going out. "I'll bet he's been eatin' some o' the fool stuff women an' gals has been concoctin' to bewitch 'im with. They say the shortest road to a man's heart is through his stomach—it's the quickest route to a man's grave, too, I'm here to state to you."

"Oh, do hush!" Mrs. Porter exclaimed, her mind on something foreign to Nathan's comment. "You two walk on; I'm going to shake hands with Brother Hillhouse and ask about his mother."

She fell back behind the crowd surging through the door, and waited for the preacher to come down the aisle to her.

"I couldn't see exactly what you were driving at," she said, extending her hand. "I never heard finer argument or argument put in better language than what you said, but it seemed to me you left off something."

"I *did*," he said, desperately. "I was going to end up with the evil tendencies he had inherited

## Pole Baker

from his parents, and the pitfalls such a man would lead others into, but I couldn't drive my tongue to it. I had gone too far in dilating on his wrongs for that, and then I caught sight of Cynthia's face. I read it. I read through it down into the depths of her soul. What I was saying was only making her glory in the prospect of self-sacrifice in his behalf. When I saw that—when I realized that it will take a miracle of God to snatch her from him, I felt everything swimming about me. Her flushed face, her sparkling, piercing eyes, drove me wild. I started in to attack him behind his back and was foiled in the effort. But I won't give up. I can't lose her—I *can't*, I tell you! She was made for me. I was made for her, and she would realize it if this devil's dream would pass."

Mrs. Porter sighed. "I don't know what to do," she declared. "If I could trust him, I'd give in, but I can't. I can't let my only child go off with any man of his stamp, on those conditions. But I must run on—they are waiting for me. She must never suspect that this was done for her benefit."

It was the afternoon of the day set for the meeting between Cynthia and Floyd. Mrs. Porter, still carrying her weighty secret, went into town actuated by nothing but the hope that she might accidentally meet Hillhouse. He seemed to be on the lookout for her, for he came down the street from the village square and waited for her to join him near the hitching-rack and public trough for the watering of horses.

"I was on the way to see you," she said, looking

## Pole Baker

about her cautiously, as if averse to being seen in his company.

"In answer to my prayer," he replied. "I'm suffering great agony, Sister Porter."

"Well, you are not any worse off than I am," she made answer. "She's my only child."

He leaned towards her till his face was close to her own. "Something must be done," he said. "I'm ready for anything. I can't bear it any longer. Last night the devil rose in me and conquered me. I was ready to kill him."

"And after all those beautiful things"—Mrs. Porter smiled calmly—"that you said about him in your sermon."

"The feeling didn't last long," Hillhouse said, gloomily. "It swept through me like a storm and left me on my knees praying God to spare her. Did she make any comment on my sermon?"

"No, but I saw it failed to affect her as we wanted it to. I have kept a close watch on her. At times she's had the appearance of a woman giving up all hope, and then again a rebellious look would come in her face, and she'd move about with a quick step, her head up and a defiant expression, as if she was telling herself that she had a right to her happiness, and would have it at any cost."

"Ah, I guess she loves him," Hillhouse sighed; "and she is fascinated by his hellish proposal and the thought that she is sacrificing something for his sake. I wish I could abuse him, but I can't. I can't blame him for trying to get her; it is no more than any man would do, any man who knows what she is."

## Pole Baker

"I want to ask you one thing, Brother Hillhouse"—Mrs. Porter was looking at a row of cottages across the square—"and I ask it as a member of your church and a woman that don't want to commit unpardonable sin. So far, I've tried to obey the commandments to the letter. I want to know if I'd ever be forgiven if I was to descend to down-right deception—lying with my tongue and lying in my actions—that is, I mean, if, by so doing, I could save my child from this thing?"

Hillhouse avoided her piercing eyes; his own shifted under lowering brows.

"If you could actually save her?" he said.

"Yes, if I could make her give him up—send him off?"

"I'll answer you this way," Hillhouse replied.

"If she were in a room and a madman came searching for her with a pistol and a long knife bent upon killing her, and if he were to ask you, as you stood at the door, if she were inside, would you say yes?"

"Of course I wouldn't."

"Well, there's your answer," said the preacher. "He's a madman—mad in soul, brain, and body. He is seeking her eternal damnation, and the damnation of unborn souls. Lie?" He laughed sardonically. "Sister Porter, I could stand before God and lie that way, and wink at the angels hovering over the throne."

"I reckon you are right," said the woman; "but I wanted to make sure. And let me tell you something. If I *do* resort to lying I'll put up a good one, and I'll back it up by acting that she nor no one else could see through. Let me alone. Leave it to me.

## Pole Baker

It's my last card, but I feel like it's going to win. I'm going home now. I can hardly walk, I feel so weak at the knees. I haven't slept regular since this thing came up. I'm going crazy—I know I am."

"Would you mind telling me what you intend to do?" Hillhouse asked, almost hopefully.

"No, I'm not ready to do that yet, but it will have a powerful effect on her. The only thing that bothered me was the sin of it, but since you think I'd have the right I'll throw my whole soul into it. She's so pure-minded that she won't suspect me."

"God grant that you succeed," Hillhouse said, fervently, and he stood as if rooted to the spot, and watched her till she had disappeared down the road leading to her home.

## XXXIV



**D**URING supper that evening Mrs. Porter eyed her daughter furtively. Cynthia ate very little and seemed abstracted, paying no heed to her father's rambling, inconsequential remarks to her grandmother, who, in her white lace cap, sat across the table from him. Supper over, the family went out, leaving Cynthia to put the dishes away. Mrs. Radcliffe shambled quietly to her own room, and Porter took his pipe to his favorite chair on the porch. Being thus at liberty to carry out her own plans, Mrs. Porter stole unnoticed into Cynthia's room, and in the half-darkness looked about her. The room was in thorough order. The white bedspread was as smooth as a drift of snow, and the pillows had not a wrinkle or a crease. The old woman noiselessly opened the top drawer of the bureau; here everything was in its place. She looked in the next and the next with the same result. Then she stood erect in the centre of the room, an expression of perplexity on her face. Suddenly she seemed to have an inspiration, and she went to the girl's closet and opened the door. And there, under a soiled dress belonging to Cynthia, she found a travelling-bag closely packed.

With a soundless groan, Mrs. Porter dropped the



## Pole Baker

dress, closed the closet-door, and moved back to the centre of the room.

"My God! my God!" she cried. "I can't stand it! She's fully made up her mind."

Mrs. Porter left the room, and, passing her husband, whose placid face appeared intermittently in a red disk of light on the end of the porch, she went down the steps into the yard and thence around the house towards the orchard and grape-arbor. She paused among the trees, looking thoughtfully at the ground.

"If I'm going to do it," she reflected, "I'd better throw out some hint in advance, to sort of lead up to it. I wonder if my mind is actually giving way? I am sure I've been through enough to—but somebody is coming."

It was Cynthia, and she came daintily over the dewy grass.

"Mother, is that you?" she called out.

Mrs. Porter made no reply.

"Mother, is that—but why didn't you answer me?" Cynthia came up, a searching look of inquiry in her eyes.

Still Mrs. Porter showed not the slightest indication of being aware of her presence. Cynthia, in increasing surprise, laid her hand on her mother's arm, but Mrs. Porter shook it off impatiently.

"Look here, Nathan, if you don't quit following me up, dogging my steps, and bothering me with your—" Mrs. Porter broke off, looking blankly into Cynthia's face.

"Why, mother, what is the matter?" the girl exclaimed.

## Pole Baker

"Oh, you look like—you look like—" Mrs. Porter moved to a near-by apple-tree and leaned against its trunk, and with her head down she began to laugh softly, almost sillily. Cynthia drew near her again, and, catching the old woman by the shoulders, she turned her forcibly to her.

"Mother, what's the matter?" she demanded, her tone now quite full of alarm.

"Oh, Cynthia, nothing is the matter with me! I'm all right, but, but, but—good gracious! just this minute you were—we were all at the table. Your pa was in his place, mother was in hers, and, how in the world"—Mrs. Porter was looking around in seeming astonishment—"how in the world did I get out here? I don't remember leaving the house. The last thing I recall was—"

"Mother, what's the matter?"

Mrs. Porter stared in a bewildered way at her daughter for a moment, then she put her hand to her brow with a weary gesture. "Something *must* be wrong with me," she declared. "I didn't want to mention it, but this evening as I was coming back from town I got rather warm, and all at once I heard a little sound and felt something give way in my head. Oh, Cynthia, I'm afraid—I'm afraid I'm going like your aunt Martha did. They say hers was a drop of blood on the brain. Do you suppose it could be that, daughter?"

"Oh, mother, come on in the house and lie down. Go to bed, and you will feel better in the morning." Cynthia caught her arm, and, greatly perturbed, slowly led the old woman towards the house.

"It's worry, daughter," Mrs. Porter said, confid-

## Pole Baker

ingly—"worry about you. You seem to be bothered on account of Nelson Floyd's being away, and I've allowed that to prey on my thoughts."

"Never mind him, mother," Cynthia said. "Come on in and lie down. You don't feel any pain, do you?"

"No, daughter, not a bit—not a bit; but your aunt didn't, either. She didn't suffer."

"Don't you think we ought to send for the doctor, mother?"

"Doctor? No—how ridiculous! Even if it is a drop on the brain, he couldn't do me a bit of good. The brain is inside the—the—what do you call it? See there, my mind isn't what it was. I can't think of as common a thing as a—you know what I mean, Cynthia."

"You mean skull, mother," the girl said, anxiously.

"Yes, I mean that. Your aunt's memory was bad, too. She suddenly forgot her own name, and came in from the strawberry-patch one day scared out of her senses. The next thing was her hand getting numb. My thumb feels queer; I believe you could stick a needle through it and I wouldn't feel it. But don't you tell your pa, Cynthia. Wait, anyway, till to-morrow, and see how I feel then. It may pass away, and then—then, again, it may be the first stroke. They say people about my age usually have three, and the last one ends it. I hope I'll go naturally—the way Martha went was horrible; and yet when I think of all my trouble I—"

"Hush, mother, don't!" Cynthia cried. They had now reached the porch. Porter had retired, and so they passed on unnoticed to Mrs. Porter's room.

## Pole Baker

Cynthia helped her mother undress and get into the bed, and then she went to her own room and sat down, irresolutely, at her table. She leaned her head on her crossed arms and remained quite still. She was very tired in brain and body, and presently dropped to sleep. She slept for about two hours. Suddenly she waked with a start. The clock in the sitting-room was striking ten. Nelson would be at the grape-arbor soon, she told herself with a shudder. Perhaps he was already there, and too cautious to whistle as on former meetings. She stood up, tiptoed to the closet, and opened the door. She uncovered the hidden valise and lifted it out into the light. Then a recollection of her mother's strange condition struck her like a blow in the face, and, standing in the centre of the room, she sighed.

Just then she heard the tread of bare feet in the hall, and a low-mumbled monologue. Her heart stood still, for she recognized her mother's voice. Going softly to the door, she peered out, and there, in a thin, white dress, stood Mrs. Porter, Nathan's double-barrelled shot-gun clutched in her hand, her long hair hanging loose on her back. The old woman's face was averted, and she seemed unaware of her daughter's presence.

"Lord, my God, pardon me for this last act," she was praying. "It may be a sin in Thy sight for a tortured person to seek escape from trouble by this course, but I can't stand it any longer."

"Mother, what is this?" Cynthia darted out into the hall and snatched the gun from her mother's hands.

For an instant Mrs. Porter stood staring at her

## Pole Baker

daughter, and then, as if to escape her glance, she turned and went slowly into Cynthia's room.

"Sh!" she said; "don't wake your pa." And, seeing Cynthia's lamp burning low, she blew down the chimney and put it out. The room was now dark save for the moonlight that struggled in at the windows on each side of the drawn shades.

"Mother, you've got to tell me," Cynthia demanded, as she leaned the cumbersome weapon against the wall and groped towards the still, white figure; "what were you going to do with that gun?"

Mrs. Porter said nothing, but moved backward to Cynthia's bed and, with a groan, sat down on it.

"Mother"—Cynthia leaned over her, a horrible fear gripping her heart-cords—"what were you about to do?"

"I don't know as I am obliged to tell you or anybody," Mrs. Porter said, doggedly.

"Mother"—Cynthia sat down by the old woman and put her arm about the gaunt figure—"what were you going to do?"

"I was going to get out of my trouble, if you *will* know," Mrs. Porter said, looking her daughter defiantly in the face.

"Your trouble, mother?"

"Yes, I've borne it as long as I can. Huh! you can't guess how much I know. I was awake last Friday night and overheard your plan to run off with Nelson Floyd. I was in a yard of you, crouched down behind the rose-bushes. You said you'd decide by to-night, and ever since then I've been tortured like a condemned soul. That's what affected my brain to-day. It wasn't the sun. Since

## Pole Baker

that awful hour I have been praying God to spare you—to have mercy on my misguided child, and I hoped He would do it, but to-night, while you were putting the dishes away, I came in here and saw your packed valise, and knew you had concluded to leave. Then—then I decided to—to go like Sister Martha did. I was going out in the meadow, by the creek, where it was quiet. I couldn't bear the thought of having to face all those curious people who will throng the house to-morrow to find out about your disgrace."

"You say you were there?" Cynthia gasped—"you heard?"

"Every word," answered Mrs. Porter; "and every one was a rusty nail in my heart."

There was silence. Cynthia had no defence to offer. She simply sat with bowed head, her arm lying limp upon her mother's thinly clad shoulders.

"Yes, you made up your mind to stain forever our family record. No other girl that I ever heard of, even among our far-off kin, ever threw away her honor as you—"

"Stop, mother, you are going too far!" Cynthia cried, removing her arm and standing erect before the old woman.

"Cynthia, my *poor, poor* baby! in all that man said the other night he didn't once mention marriage.

"But he meant it, mother!" broke from the girl's pallid lips—"he meant it!"

"He didn't mean anything of the kind, you little fool! As plain as plain could be, he said, right out, that he had no name to give you. And any fool

## Pole Baker

knows no marriage can be legal unless it is brought about under the lawful names of the contracting parties. He simply was trying to give you to understand that he wanted you as a companion in his sin and misery. He has lost his right to a foothold in society, and he wants you, of your own accord and free will, to renounce yours. It was a crazy idea, and one that could have come from none but a brain disordered by liquor, but that is what he had in view."

"I don't believe it," Cynthia said, firmly.

"It doesn't make any difference what you believe," Mrs. Porter returned. "I'm older than you, and I see through him. He tried and tried to ruin you as he did Minnie Wade, but when he was reduced to despair by his trouble he rose from his debauch and wanted to turn his very misfortune to your undoing. The idiot was trying to make himself believe, because his parents had brought all that nastiness down on him, that he would be justified in a like course. The disgrace he had inherited he intended to hand down to another generation, and you—you poor, simple thing!—you calmly packed your white, unspotted things and were ready to sell yourself to his hellish purpose."

There was awful silence. Cynthia stared, unable to utter a word. She may have doubted the fairness of her mother's version, but the grim picture painted there in the darkness by a woman in seeming readiness to take her own life on account of it fairly chilled her young life's blood. Suddenly a sound broke the outside stillness. There was no mistaking it. It rang out as shrilly on the girl's quaking

## Pole Baker

consciousness as the shriek of a locomotive dashing through a mountain gorge.

"There he is now," said Mrs. Porter. "Pick up your valise and hurry, hurry to him; but before you go hand me that gun. Before you and he get in that buggy you'll hear my death-knell, and you may know, too, that you fired the shot into the withered breast that nursed you. Go! I'm not keeping you!"

Cynthia swayed visibly in the darkness, and then she sank to her knees and put her head in her mother's lap.

"I won't go," she groaned, softly. "Mother, I'll do anything you say—anything!"

"Now you are joking, I know," Mrs. Porter said, harshly.

"No, I mean it—God knows I mean it, mother! Only give me a chance to prove that I mean it. I'll never see him again, if that will suit you—never on earth! I'll stay and nurse you and make you well."

"If I thought you meant that, Cynthia—Lord, Lord, what a load it would take off of me! Don't—don't say that unless you mean it; the—the joy of saving you would almost kill me."

"Oh, mother, God knows I mean it!"

"Then"—Mrs. Porter seemed to squeeze her words from her frail body as she stiffly rose to her feet—"then you must let me go, myself, out there and send him off."

Cynthia, still on her knees, glanced up, her startled eyes wide open.

"Would you ask that, mother?"

"Yes, for in my present condition I'm afraid I'd



## Pole Baker

never believe it was absolutely settled. I—I'm not as clear-headed as I used to be. I've got deep-rooted suspicions, and I'm afraid they would prey on my mind."

"Then go, mother—go send him away. I'd rather never see him again on earth than to cause you to—to contemplate—but go, mother!"

"Well, you stay here then." Mrs. Porter was moving towards the door. "I'll be easy with him. I'm so happy over this release that I feel grateful even to him. I'll be gentle, Cynthia."

As she stood in the door-way of the chamber and glanced back, Mrs. Porter saw Cynthia throw herself face downward on the bed. The old woman was in the hall making her way towards the front-door when she heard Cynthia call her. Retracing her steps, she found her daughter sitting up.

"Mother," the girl said, "let me go with you. You can hear all that passes between us. That ought to be satisfactory."

"No, that won't suit me," Mrs. Porter said, firmly. "I've set my heart on your never facing that man again. For you to go, it would look like you are crazy after him, and he'd hang around here no telling how long."

"Then go on, mother." Cynthia fell back on the bed, and, covering her face with her hands, lay still.



AS Mrs. Porter stepped down into the yard the whippoorwill call sounded again. "Huh!" she said to herself, exultingly, "I reckon I'll reach there soon enough to suit you, Nelson Floyd. You wanted to get her away from her mother's tongue, did you? Well, you'll find that I'm no fool, if I *am* old."

As she emerged from the shade of the apple-trees into the little open in front of the grape-arbor, Nelson Floyd, the red, impatient flare of a cigar in his face, appeared in the door-way.

"Thank God you didn't fail me!" he exclaimed, in accents of vast relief. "For a while I was actually afraid—"

"Afraid that I wouldn't be on time!" Mrs. Porter broke in, with a metallic little laugh. "I always keep my engagements, Nelson Floyd—or, I beg your pardon, Cynthia says you don't call yourself by that name now."

"Great God, it's *you*!" he exclaimed, and his cigar fell at his feet. "Why, Mrs. Porter—"

"Oh, we needn't stand here and take up time talking about whether it's going to rain or not," she sneered. "The truth is, I'm due in bed. I've been asleep in my chair half a dozen times since supper."

## Pole Baker

You see, I promised Cynthia that I'd keep this appointment for her, and she tumbled into bed, and is snoozing along at a great rate, while I am doing her work."

"You—you promised—I—I—don't understand," Floyd managed to get out of the chaos of his brain.

"Oh, I reckon you don't see it exactly *our* way," Mrs. Porter sneered. "And that's because of your high opinion of your own charm. There is nothing on earth that will lead a man from the road of fact as quick as vanity. You thought my girl would jump at your proposition, but, la me! she just dallied with you to get you away last Friday night. At least, that's what I think, for she brought the whole thing to me the next morning, even telling me how you abused me behind my back. She asked me how she'd better get out of it. Most girls plunge headlong into things of this kind without deliberation, but she's not that way. She generally looks ahead, and the truth is, if I may tell state secrets, she has a strong leaning towards Brother Hillhouse. He's a good man—a man that can be counted on—and a man with a respectable family behind him, and, while I'm not sure about it, I think she intends to accept him."

"Great God, Mrs. Porter, you don't mean that she—"

"You see there! I knew you were incapable of seeing anything that don't tend to your own glory. You thought all along that my girl was crazy about you, but you didn't know her. She's no fool. She's got a long head on her shoulders."

## Pole Baker

"But didn't she—she send me any message?" Floyd asked, in a tone of abject bewilderment.

"Oh yes, now I come to think of it, she did. She said for me to beg you never to bother her any more."

"She said that? Oh, Mrs. Porter, I—"

"Yes, and just as she was cuddling up in bed"—Mrs. Porter's selection of words had never been so adroit—"she called me to her and said that she wondered if you would mind never telling how foolish she had been to meet you out here like she did. I don't know why she was so particular, unless it is that people in this day and time love to throw up to a preacher's wife all the imprudent things she did when she was young."

"Mrs. Porter, do you actually think Cynthia loves that man?" Floyd's voice shook, and he leaned heavily against the frame of the arbor.

"Love him? How can anybody tell who a woman loves? They don't know themselves half the time; but I'll say this to you: Mr. Hillhouse has been courting her in an open, straightforward way, and that pleased her. He's a man of brains, too, and is going to work his way high up in his profession. He'll be a great light some day. The regard of a man like that is a compliment to a poor country girl; and then she is sure of a life of solid respectability, while with you—good gracious! What's the use of talking about it? But you haven't told me whether you will agree not to bother her again. She'll be anxious to know what you said about that. You see, you might get drunk again, and there is no telling how foolish and persistent you may become, and—"

## Pole Baker

"I shall not bother her again," said Floyd. "Tell her I gave you my faithful promise on that. Not only that, but I am going away, and shall never come back here again."

"Well, I'll tell her—I'll tell her in the morning as soon as she wakes up. La me! I used to be a girl myself, and there was no bother equal to having an old beau hanging around, as we girls used to say in slang, after he'd got his 'walking papers'—that is, after the right man was settled on."

"There is one thing I want you to tell her"—Floyd breathed heavily—"and that is that I'll never care for any other girl."

"Shucks! I won't take any such message as that," the old woman sniffed. "Besides, what's the use? After a flirtation is laid away it ought to die a natural death. The biggest wasters of time in the world are married women who love to look back on old love-scrapes, and sit and brag about them, instead of mending socks and attending to the responsibilities that are piled up on every hand. Well, I'm going in now. It's been a long, hot day, but in this thin dress I feel chilly. I don't want to be hard on you, and I wish you well, so I do, wherever you go."

"Thank you, Mrs. Porter," and, with his head hanging low, Nelson Floyd turned to leave. "I can only assure you," he added, "that I'll never trouble Cynthia any more. I shall certainly respect her wish."

"All right; that's as much as she could ask of you," the old woman returned; "and perhaps, since you are so polite, I ought to thank you."

## Pole Baker

As she was drawing near the house, she said to herself with a low, satisfied chuckle: "I believe I worked him exactly right. If I'd 'a' let him know I suspected his full villany he wouldn't have been shaken off so easily. But what am I going to do about that drop of blood on my brain?" she laughed. "If I get rid of it too suddenly Cynthia may smell a mouse. I believe I'll wait a few days and then tell her I think my stroke was due to that new hair-restorer I'm using, an' promise to throw it away." She paused at the steps and shuddered. "But am I not really a little off?" she mused. "Surely no woman in the full possession of her senses could have gone through all that, as if it were God's truth from beginning to end."

Inside the hall, after she had softly shut the front door, she saw Cynthia standing on the threshold of her chamber.

"Did you see him, mother?" The question was hardly above a whisper.

"Oh yes, I saw him," the old woman answered, frigidly. "I saw him."

"What did he say, mother?" The girl's voice was low, tremulous, and halting.

"Oh, I don't know as he said much of anything, he was so set back by seeing me in this outfit instead of you in your best Sunday-go-to-meeting, with your valise in hand, ready to fly to the moon with him. He let me do most of the talking." Mrs. Porter managed to stifle a chuckle of satisfaction, and the darkness hid her impulsive smile. "He seemed to be more reasonable, though, than most men would be in his condition. I don't think he

## Pole Baker

was fully sober; he smoked like a steam-engine, dropping cigars and lighting fresh ones, as if they were his main-stay and support. He agreed with me, in a roundabout way, that it was a foolish thing for him to expect a respectable girl to run off in the dead of night with a man of his stamp, and he ended by saying for me to tell you that he was going away off somewhere and that he wouldn't bother you any more. He looked and acted like a thief caught on the spot with the goods in hand and was ready to promise anything to escape arrest and prosecution."

"Well, you have had your way, mother," Cynthia said, quietly; "I hope you will feel better satisfied now."

"Oh, I will, I will—in fact, I feel some better already." There was another incipient chuckle far down in Mrs. Porter's throat, but she coughed it away. "I really feel like I'm going to get well. I'll sleep like a log to-night. You'd better turn in yourself, daughter."

"All right, mother—good-night."

The next morning, shortly after breakfast, as Mrs. Porter was attending to some hens' nests in the barn-yard, Hillhouse crept out of the thicket just beyond the fence and approached her. He was quite pale and nervous, and bent his head and shoulders that the high staked-and-ridered rail-fence might hide him from the view of the house.

"I've been out here in the woods for an hour watching your back-door," he said. "I was in hopes that I'd see Cynthia moving about in the dining-

## Pole Baker

room or kitchen. You see, I don't know yet whether she went off last night or stayed. I haven't closed my eyes since I saw you."

"Well, you *have* got it bad," Mrs. Porter laughed, dryly, "and you needn't worry any more. I reckon I spilled ink all over my record in the Lamb's Book of Life, but I set in to succeed, and I worked it so fine that she let me go out and send him away for good and all."

"Oh, Sister Porter, is that true?"

"It's a great deal truer than anything that passed my lips last night," Mrs. Porter answered, crisply. "Brother Hillhouse, if I ever get forgiveness, there is one of the commandments that will have to be cut out of the list, for I certainly broke it all to smash. I had a separate lie stowed away in every pore of my skin last night, and they hung like cockle-burs to every hair of my head. I wish I was a Catholic."

"A Catholic?" Hillhouse repeated, his eyes dancing in delight, his sallow skin taking on color.

"Yes, I'd sell our horses and cows and land, and give it to a priest, and tell him to wipe my soul clean with the proceeds. I feel happy, and I feel mean. Something tells me that I'd have made an expert woman thief—perhaps the greatest in the history of all nations."

"What sort of fibs did you tell, Sister Porter?" Hillhouse was smiling unctuously and rubbing his long hands together.

"Well, I don't intend to tell you," said the old woman; "besides, it would take a week. I spun the finest fabric of falsehood that was ever made.



## Pole Baker

And I'm not done yet, for I've got to keep it up, and not let it lop off too suddenly."

"Well, do you think there will be any living chance for me?" the preacher said.

"Yes, I do—that is, if you won't push matters too fast and will be patient. I have a plan now that you will like. Didn't you tell me you were going to preach two sermons this month at Cartersville?"


"Yes, I take Brother Johnston's place for two weeks while he goes off for his vacation."

"Well," said Mrs. Porter, "you know Nathan's brother George lives there. In fact, his wife and daughters belong to Mr. Johnston's church. George is a well-to-do lawyer, and his children dote on Cynthia; now I'm going to send her down there for a change."

"Oh, that will be simply fine!" Hillhouse cried, his face aglow.

"Yes, and if you can't make hay while the sun shines down there, you'll deserve to fail. Cynthia has promised to give Floyd up, and he's agreed not to bother her any more. Now you slip back into the woods. I wouldn't have her see you here at this time of day for anything. When she gets her thinking apparatus to work she's going to do a lot of wondering, anyway."

## XXXVI

EN days passed. It was now towards the close of a hot and sultry August. Nothing more had been heard of Nelson Floyd, and the sensation due to his mysterious absence had, to some extent, subsided. That Mayhew knew of his whereabouts few persons doubted, for it was noticeable that the old man had put his shoulder to the wheel and was attending to business with less fear and nervousness. It was the opinion of Mrs. Snodgrass that he knew exactly where Floyd was, and expected him to return sooner or later. In fact, it was known to many that Mayhew had suddenly ceased to make inquiry through detectives and the police, and that meant something. The information that Floyd had been back in secret to his home would have startled the community from centre to outer edge, but that was discreetly kept to themselves by the few who knew of it.

Pole Baker was the first to meet Floyd again. It was in Atlanta. Standing in the main entrance of the Kimball House one afternoon, Pole saw Floyd on the opposite side of the street. He was walking rapidly, his head up. He was neatly dressed, clean-shaven, and had a clear, healthful complexion, as if he were in good physical condition.

## Pole Baker

"Thank God! thar he goes," Pole exclaimed, "an' I'll bet a hoss he's quit drinkin'." Quickly darting across the street, he followed Floyd the best he could on the crowded sidewalk. He had pursued him thus for several blocks when Floyd suddenly entered one of the large wholesale dry-goods stores. Reaching the door and looking in, Pole saw his friend just disappearing in the glass-enclosed office in the rear of the big room. Pole entered and stood waiting amid the stacks of cotton and woollen goods which, in rolls and bolts, were heaped as high as his shoulders over the whole floor. Salesmen were busy with customers in different parts of the room, and porters and "stock men" hurried by with big baskets on wheels, and little notice was taken of the mountaineer.

Presently Floyd emerged and came rapidly down one of the aisles towards the door. Pole stepped directly in front of him.

"Why, hello!" Floyd exclaimed, flushing suddenly as he cordially extended his hand. "I wasn't looking for you, Pole."

"Well, you differ from me," said Baker; "that's just what I was doin'. I was lookin' fer you, Nelson. I begun yesterday an' kept it up till I seed you go by the Kimball jest now like you was shot out of a gun, an' I bent to the trail, an' here I am. Yes, I want to see you. I've got a favor to ax, old friend."

"Well, you can have anything I've got." Floyd smiled rather sheepishly as he laid his hand on Pole's shoulder. "The only trouble right now is that I'm pressed for time. A lot depends on what

## Pole Baker

may take place in the next two hours, and I'm afraid to think of anything else. When do you go back?"

"Oh, I kin take a train any time. I'm in no big hurry, Nelson. All I want is to get to talk to you a few minutes."

"Then I'll tell you what to do," Floyd proposed. "Take this key to my room at the Kimball House. I've got a bed to spare up there. And, more than that, Pole, go in and take your supper in my place. It will be all right. I registered on the American plan. Then I'll meet you in the room about eight o'clock. You see, it's this way: I've brought a fellow with me from Birmingham, and he's back there in the office now. He and I are on a trade for all my iron lands in Alabama. A thing like this is a big, exciting game with me; it drives out all other thoughts, and, the Lord knows, right now I need some diversion. He and I are going to the house of a friend of his in the country and take early supper there. I'll be back by eight, sure, Pole."

"That 'll suit me all right," said Pole, as he took the key and looked at the number on the brass tag. "I'll be there, Nelson. I wouldn't let you stand for my expenses, but if your bill's paid anyway, that's different."

"Yes, it won't cost me a cent extra," said Floyd. "Here comes my man now. I'd introduce you, but we are in a devil of a hurry."

"Are you ready?" a middle-aged man in a linen suit and straw hat asked, as he walked up hastily. "I'll make the driver strike a brisk gait."

## **Pole Baker**

**"Yes, I'm ready," Floyd said, and he turned to Baker. "Don't forget, Pole." As he was walking away, he threw back: "I'll meet you at eight or before, sure. I don't want to miss you."**

## XXXVII



THAT night, after supper, Pole was in Floyd's room at the hotel. The weather being warm, he had raised the window, which opened on a busy street, and sat smoking, with his coat off. From the outside came the clanging of street-car bells and the shrill voices of newsboys crying the afternoon papers. Suddenly he heard the iron door of the elevator slide back, and a moment later Floyd stood on the threshold of the room.

"Well, I succeeded, Pole!" he cried, sitting down on the window-sill and fanning himself with his straw hat. "I sold out, lock, stock, and barrel, and at an advance that I never would have dreamed of asking if I hadn't been in a reckless mood. Really, I didn't know the property was so valuable. My man kept hanging onto me, following me from place to place, wanting to know what I'd take, till finally, simply to get rid of him, I priced the property at three times what I had ever asked for it. To my astonishment, he said he would come over to Atlanta with me, and if certain friends of his would help him carry it he would trade. Pole, my boy, I've made more money to-day than I've made all the rest of my life put together, and" — Floyd sighed as he tossed his hat on one of the beds and locked his

## Pole Baker

hands behind his neck—"I reckon I care less for material prosperity than I ever did."

"Well, I'm glad you made a good trade," Pole said. "You were born lucky, my boy."

"Oh, I don't know," answered Floyd; "but here I am talking about my own affairs when you came to see me about yours. What can I do for you, Pole? If it's money you want, you certainly came to headquarters, and you can get all you want and no questions asked."

"I didn't come to see you on my own business, Nelson," Pole answered. "I'm here on account of old man Mayhew. Nelson, he's mighty nigh plumb crazy over you bein' away. He can't run that thing up thar single-handed; he's leaned too long on you fer that, an' then he's gittin' old and sorter childish. I never knowed it before, Nelson, but he looks on you sorter like a son. The old fellow's eyes got full an' he choked up when he was beggin' me to come down here an' see you. He gathered from yore last letter that you intended to go West and live, an' he called me in an' begged me to come and persuade you not to do it. Nelson, I'll hate it like rips, too, ef you leave us. Them old mountains is yore rightful home, an' I'm here to tell you that God Almighty never give any one man more friends than you've got amongst them plain, honest folks. By gum! they jest stand around in bunches an' talk an' talk about you an'—an' yore—late trouble. Thar ain't one in the lot but what 'ud be glad to help you bear it."

Floyd stood up suddenly, and, with his hands behind him, he began to walk back and forth across the room.

## Pole Baker

"It's the only spot on earth I'll ever care about," Pole heard him say in a deep, husky voice, "and God knows I love the people; but I don't want to go back, Pole. Fate rather rubbed it in on me up there. All my early life I nursed the hope that I would eventually be able to prove that my parents were good, respectable people, and then when I was beginning to despair it went out that I belonged to a great and high family, and the aristocracy of the section extended their hands and congratulated me and patted me on the back. But that wasn't for long. My guardian angel—my old stand-by, Pole—came to me with a malignant grin and handed me the information that I was—was what you couldn't call the humblest man you know up there and live a minute later."

"I know—I know, Nelson," sighed Pole, his honest face tortured by inward sympathy. "I see you've got a big, big argument in favor o' the step you are thinking about, but I want to see if I can't put it to you in another light. Listen to me, my boy. Different men suffer in different ways. Maybe you don't think I've suffered any to speak of. But, my boy, when I was tried by my peers up thar, in the open court of God's soft starlight—when my neighbors, well-meanin', fair-thinkin' folks, come to me in the night-time an' called me out to lay the lash on my bare back fer wilful neglect o' them that was dear an' true to me, all—all, I say—that was wuth a tinker's damn in me sunk down, down into the bottomless pit o' hell. I thought about shirkin', about pullin' up stakes an' goin' away off some'rs to begin new, but I seed that wouldn't wipe it out o'



## Pole Baker

folks' memories, nor out o' me, and so I decided to stay right thar an' fight—fight it to a finish. It was awful to meet them men in the light o' day with the'r masks off, an' know what each one was a-thinkin', but I went through it, and, thank God, I begin to see light ahead. It looks like they understand my struggle an' think none the less o' me. Lord, Lord, ef you could jest witness the kind words an' gentle ways o' them men towards me an' mine now, you'd believe what preachers say about the spirit o' God dwellin' in every man's breast."

Floyd had turned, and he now laid a sympathetic hand on Pole's shoulder.

"I knew what you were going through," he said, "and I wanted to help you, but didn't know how. Then this damned thing came on me like a bolt from a clear sky."

"Nelson, listen to me. I am here to-night to beg you to do like I done—to come back to yore old home and meet that thing face to face. As God is my judge, I believe sech great big troubles as yore'n are laid on folks fer a good purpose. Other men have gone through exactly what you've had to bear, an' lived to become great characters in the history o' the world's progress. Nelson, that's the one an' only thing left fer you to do. It's hell, but it will be fer yore own good in the end. Buck up agin it, my boy, an' what seems hard now will look as easy after a while as fallin' off a log."

Floyd turned and began to walk back and forth again. The room was filled with silence. Through the open window came the sound of brass musical instruments, the rattling of a tambourine, the ring-

## Pole Baker

ing of cymbals. Then a clear voice—that of a young woman—rose in a sacred song. It was a band of Salvationists clustered near a street corner under a hanging arc light. Floyd paused near to Pole and looked thoughtfully from the window; then he sat down on the bed. For a moment he stared at the floor, and then, folding his arms across his breast, he suddenly raised his head.

"Pole," he said, firmly, "I'm going to take your advice."

There was silence. The two men sat facing each other. Suddenly the mountaineer leaned over and said: "Give me your hand on it, Nelson. You'll never regret this as long as you live."

Floyd extended his hand and then got up and began to walk back and forth across the room again.

"I've got another trouble to bear, Pole," he said, gloomily.

"You say you have, Nelson?"

"Yes, and it is worse than all. Pole, I've lost the love of the only woman I ever really cared for."

"You mean Cynthia Porter?" said Pole, and he leaned forward, his eyes burning.

Floyd nodded, took one or two steps, and then paused near to Pole. "You don't know it, perhaps, but I've been back up there lately."

"Oh no!"

"Yes, I went back to see her. I couldn't stay away from her. I had been on a protracted spree. I was on the brink of suicide, in a disordered condition of mind and body, when all at once it occurred to me that perhaps she might not absolutely scorn me. Pole, the very hope that she might be willing

## Pole Baker

to share my misfortune suddenly sobered me. I was in an awful condition, but I stopped drinking and went up there one night. I secretly met her and proposed an elopement. The poor little girl was so excited that she would not decide then, but she agreed to give me her final decision a week later."

"Great God! you don't mean it, Nelson!" the mountaineer cried in surprise—"shorely you don't!"

"Yes, I do. Then I went back to fill the appointment, but she had confided it all to her mother, and the old lady came out and told me that Cynthia not only refused me, but that she earnestly hoped I would never bother her again."

"My Lord!" Pole exclaimed; "and there was a time when I actually thought—but that's *her* matter, Nelson. A man hain't got no right on earth dabblin' in a woman's heart-affairs. To me nothin' ain't more sacred than a woman's choice of her life-partner."

"Mrs. Porter hinted plainly that Cynthia was thinking of marrying Hillhouse," said Floyd.

"Ah, now I begin to see ahead!" the farmer said, reflectively. Cynthia's down at Cartersville now, on a visit to her cousins, and the long-legged parson is there, too, filling in for another preacher. I don't pretend to understand women, Nelson. Thar's been a lots o' talk about her and Hillhouse since you went off. I axed Sally what she thought about it, an' she seemed to think if Cynthia had quit thinkin' o' you it was due to the reports in circulation that you had started in to drinkin'. Sally thought that Cynthia was one woman that 'ud not resk her

## Pole Baker

chance with a drinkin' man. Cynthia's a good girl, Nelson, and maybe she thinks she kin make herse'f useful in life by marrying a preacher. I dunno. And then he is a bright sort of fellow; he is sharp enough to know that she is the smartest and best unmarried woman in Georgia. Well, that will be purty hard fer you to bear, but you must face it along with the other, my boy."

"Yes, I've got to grin and bear it," Floyd said, almost under his breath. "I've got to face that and the knowledge that I might have won her if I had gone about it in the right way. From my unfortunate father I have inherited some gross passions, Pole, and I was not always strong enough to rise above them. I made many big mistakes before I met her, and even after that, I blush to say, my old tendency clung to me so that—well, I never understood her, as she really deserved, till the day you raked me over the coals at the bush-arbor meeting. Pole, that night, when she and I were thrown by the storm in that barn together, I remembered all you said. It seemed to give me new birth, and I saw her for the first time as she was, in all her wonderful womanly strength and beauty of character and soul, and from that moment I loved her. My God, Pole, the realization of that big, new passion broke over me like a great, dazzling light. It took me in its grasp and shook everything that was vile and gross out of me. From that moment I could never look into her face for very shame of having failed to comprehend her."

"I seed you was in danger," Pole said, modestly. "It was a mighty hard thing to have to talk as I

## Pole Baker

did to a friend, but I felt that it was my duty, and out it come. I'm not goin' to take no hand in this, though, Nelson. I think you are in every way worthy o' her, but, as I say, only a woman kin tell who she ought to yoke with fer life. If she refused you, after due deliberation, an' decided on another man, why, I hain't one single word to say. I'm after her happiness, as I'm after yore'n. I'd like to see you linked together, but ef that ain't to be, then I want to see you both happy apart."

For a moment neither spoke. Then it seemed that Pole wanted to change the subject.

"In tryin' to run upon you this mornin', Nelson," he said, "I went out to yore — out to Henry A. Floyd's. That woman, his housekeeper, met me at the door an' let me inside the hall. She's a kind, talkative old soul, and she's worried mighty nigh to death about the old man. She remembered seein' me before, an' she set in to tellin' me all about his troubles. It seems that he's had some lawsuit, an' his last scrap o' property is to be tuck away from him. She told me thar was a debt of three thousand dollars to pay in the morning or everything would go. While she was talkin' he come along, lookin' more dead than alive, an' I axed 'im ef he could put me on to yore track. He glared at me like a crazy man; his jaws was all sunk in, an' with his gray hair an' beard untrimmed, an' his body all of a quiver, he simply looked terrible.

"No," said he, "I don't know whar you kin find 'im. I've heard that he was in trouble, an' I'm sorry, fer I know what trouble means," an' with that he stood thar twistin' his hands an' cryin' like a

## Pole Baker

pitiful little child about the three thousand dollars his creditors wanted, an' that thar wasn't a ghost of a chance to raise it. He said he'd made every effort, an' now was starin' starvation in the face. He turned an' went back to his room, puttin' his old, bony hand on the wall to keep from fallin' as he moved along. I'm a pore man, Nelson, but, by all that's holy, ef I'd 'a' had the money the old chap wanted this mornin' I'd 'a' hauled it out an' 'a' kissed it farewell. I'm that way, Nelson. A fool an' his money is soon parted. I'd 'a' been seven idiots in a row ef I'd 'a' had that much cash, fer I'd certainly 'a' yanked that squirmin' old chap off'n his bed o' coals."

Floyd bent towards the speaker. Their eyes met understandingly.

"But I've got money, Pole—money to spare—and that old wreck is my father's only brother. I've made a fortune in a single deal to-day. Look here, Pole, I'm going out there to-night—to-night, do you understand?—to-night, before he goes to bed, and give him a check that will more than cover his shortage."

"Are you goin' to do that, Nelson?"

"Yes, I am. Do you want to come along to witness it?"

"No, I'll wait fer you here, but God bless you, my boy. You'll never, never be sorry fer it, if you live to be a hundred years old."


Floyd sat down at a table, and, with a check-book in hand, was adjusting his fountain-pen. Pole went to the window and looked out. Down in the glare below a woman in a blue hood and

## Pole Baker

dress stood praying aloud, in a clear, appealing voice, while all about her were grouped the other Salvationists and a few earnest-eyed spectators.

"That's right, Miss Blue-frock," Pole said to himself; "go ahead an' rake in yore converts from the highways an' byways, but I've got one in this room you needn't bother about. By gum! ef it was jest a little darker in here, I'll bet I could see a ring o' fire round his head."

## XXXVIII

N the street below, Nelson took a car for his uncle's residence, and fifteen minutes later he was standing on the veranda ringing the bell. Through a window on his left he looked into a lighted room. He saw old Floyd's bent figure moving about within, and then the housekeeper admitted him into the dimly lighted hall. She regarded him with surprise as she recalled his face.

"You want to see Mr. Floyd?" she said. "I'll see if he will let you come in. He's in a frightful condition, sir, over his troubles. Really, sir, he's so desperate I'm afraid he may do himself some harm."

Leaving Nelson standing in the hall, she went into the lighted room, and the young man heard her talking persuasively to her master. Presently she came back and motioned the visitor to enter. He did so, finding the old man standing over a table covered with letters, deeds, and other legal documents. He did not offer his hand, and the young man stood in some embarrassment before him.

"Well," old Floyd said, "what do you want? Are you here to gloat over me?"

"No, I am not," returned the visitor. "It is simply because I do not feel that way that I came.



## Pole Baker

A friend of mine was here to-day, and he said you were in trouble."

"Trouble?—huh!" snarled old Floyd. "I guess you are glad to know that."

"I certainly am not," Nelson said, warmly. "I heard of it only a few minutes ago at the Kimball House, where I am staying, and I took the first car to reach you. I wish I had heard of the matter earlier—that is, if you will allow me to help you out."

"You—you help me?" Old Floyd extended his thin hand and drew a chair to him and sank into it. "They've all talked that way—every money-lender and banker that I have applied to. They all say they want to help, but when they look at these"—Floyd waved his hand despondently over the documents—"when they look at these, and see the size of the mortgage, they make excuses and back out. I don't want to waste time with you. I know what sort of man you are. You have made what you've got by being as close as the bark on a tree, and I'm going to tell you at the outset that I haven't any security—not a dollar's worth."

"I didn't want security," Nelson said, looking sympathetically down into the withered face.

"You don't want—" The old man, his hands on his knees, made an effort to rise, but failed. "My Lord, you say you don't want security; then—then what the devil *do* you want?"

"I want to *give* you the money, if you'll do me the honor to accept it," Nelson declared. "My friend told me the amount was exactly three thousand. I have drawn this check for four." The young

## Pole Baker

man was extending the pink slip of paper towards him. "And if that is not enough to put you squarely on your feet, I am ready to increase it."

"You mean—" The old man took the check and, with blearing eyes and shaking hands, examined it in the lamplight. "You mean that you will *give*—actually *give* me four thousand dollars, when I haven't a scrap of security to put up?"

"Yes, that's exactly what I mean."

Old Floyd took his eyes from the check and shrinkingly raised them to the young man's face. Then he dropped the paper on the table and groaned. There was silence for a moment. The housekeeper, passing by the open door, looked in wonderingly, and moved on. The old man saw her, and, rising suspiciously, he shambled to the door and closed it. Then he turned aimlessly and came slowly back, his hand pressed to his brow.

"I can't make it out," Nelson heard him muttering. "I'm afraid of it. It may be a trick, and yet what trick could anybody play on a man in the hole I'm in? *Four thousand?*" He was looking first at the check and then at his caller. "Four thousand would save me from actual ruin—it would make me comfortable for life. I can't believe you mean to give it to me—really *give* it. The world isn't built that way. It would be very unbecoming in me to doubt you, to impugn your motives, sir, but I'm all upset. The doctors say my mind is affected. One lawyer, a sharper, suggested that I could get out of this debt by claiming that I was not mentally responsible when I signed the papers, but that wouldn't work. I knew mighty well what I was

## Pole Baker

doing. Now, on top of it all, here you come—you of all living men—and, in so many plain English words—offer to give me a thousand more than the debt. Sir, I don't want to be impolite, but I simply can't believe that you mean it."

Greatly moved, the young man put his hands on the old man's shoulders and gently pressed him down into his chair; then he got another and sat close to him.

"Try to look at this thing calmly," he said. "In the first place, you don't understand me. You are not a relative of mine by law, but by blood you are the only one I ever saw. You are the brother of the man who gave me life—such as it is—and, for aught I know, you may even resemble him. I have been in great trouble over the revelations you made recently, but all that has burned itself to a cinder within me, and I have determined to go back up there in the mountains and face it. But that isn't all. Certain investments I have made in the past are turning out money in the most prodigal manner. The amount I am offering you is a mere trifle to what I have made in one single transfer of property to-day. I sincerely want you to take it. It would give me great joy to help you, and, if you refuse, it will pain me more than I can say. We are not relatives before the world, but we are by ties of nature, and I pity you to-night as I never pitied any human being in my life."

"My God! my God!" The old man struggled again to his feet, his eyes avoiding Nelson's earnest stare. "Wait here. Keep your seat, sir. Let me think. I can't take your money without mak-

## Pole Baker

ing a return for it. Let me think." He tottered to the door, opened it, and passed out into the hall. There Nelson heard him striding back and forth for several minutes. Presently he came back. He was walking more erectly. There was in his eyes a flitting gleam of hope. Approaching, he laid a quivering hand on Nelson's shoulder. "I have thought of a plan," he said, almost eagerly. "Your partner in business, Mr.—Mr. Mayhew, came down here looking for you, and he told me how my unpleasant disclosure had unstrung you, upset your prospects, and caused you to leave home. Now, see here. It has just occurred to me that I am actually the only living individual who knows the—the true facts about your birth and your father's life. Now here is what I can and will do—you see, what *I* say, what *I* testify to during my lifetime will stand always. I am willing to take that—that money, if you will let me give you sworn papers, showing that it was all a mistake, and that your parents were actually man and wife. This could harm no one, and it would be only justice to you."

Nelson stood up suddenly. It was as if a great light had suddenly burst over him. His blood bounded through his veins.

"You will do that?" he cried—"that?"

"Yes, and not a living soul could ever contradict it," the old man said, eagerly. "I can put into your hands indisputable proof. More than that, I'll write up to Mayhew and Duncan in your neighborhood and show the matter in a thoroughly new light."

The eyes of the two men met. For a moment

## Pole Baker

there was silence in the room so profound that the flame of the lamp made an audible sound like the drone of an imprisoned insect. The old man was the first to speak.

"What do you say?" he asked, almost gleefully, and he rubbed his palms together till the dry skin emitted a low, rasping sound.

Suddenly Nelson sank back into his chair and covered his face with his hands.

"What do you say?" repeated the old man; "surely you won't re—"

He was interrupted by Nelson, who suddenly looked up, and with a frank stare into the old man's face he said, calmly:

"No, I can't be a party to that, Mr. Floyd. I fully understand all it would mean to me before the world, but I am not willing to bear the stamp of a lie, no matter how justifiable it may seem, all through life. A man can enjoy being only what he really *is*, either high or low. No, sir, I appreciate your willingness to help me, but you can't do it that way."

"Why, you—you can't mean to refuse!" old Floyd gasped.

"I *have* to," said the young man. "As for the real dishonesty of the thing, I might as well be any other sort of impostor. No, I want to be only what I am in this world. Besides, I can't be a party to your swearing a lie. No, I'll have to decline."

"Then—then," the old man groaned—"then I can't take your money."

"But you'll have to," Nelson smiled, sadly. "I can *make* you do it. I'll give you no other recourse.

## Pole Baker

I shall simply instruct the bank in the morning to place it to your credit and charge it to my account. If you don't draw it out, neither you nor I will get the benefit of it, for I shall never touch it again."

Taking his hat, Nelson moved towards the door, followed by the tottering, faintly protesting old man. And as he was leaving the last words the visitor heard were: "I can't take it, sir. I can't take money from you, as bad as I need it. I can't—I can't!"

When Nelson Floyd reached the hotel it was eleven o'clock. He found Pole seated in the dark at an open window, his coat and shoes off. He was smoking.

"Well, here you are," was the mountaineer's greeting. "I was sorter sleepy, but I wanted to hear what you done, so I run down an' got me a nickel cigar. Then I've put in my time watchin' the folks in the street. I'll be dadblasted ef thar ain't as many night-hawks on the wing now as thar was jest after supper."

Nelson threw off his coat and hat and sat down and recounted briefly all that had taken place at Floyd's, Pole smoking thoughtfully the while. When Nelson ceased speaking Pole rose and began to undress.

"So the blamed old codger talked like he wasn't goin' to draw the money, eh?" he said. "Well, that sorter upsets me; I can't exactly make it out, Nelson. I'll have to think that over. It ain't what I expected him to do. I thought he'd pounce on

## Pole Baker

it like a duck on a June-bug. No, that's quar, I tell you—powerful quar!”

They had been in bed perhaps two hours and Floyd was asleep, when something waked him and he lay still, listening. Then, looking through the darkness, he saw Pole sitting on the edge of his bed, his feet on the floor.

“It ain't no use,” Floyd heard him muttering; “I can't sleep—thar ain't no good in tryin'.”

“What's the reason you can't sleep?” Floyd asked, suddenly.

“Oh!” Pole exclaimed, “I didn't know you was awake. I heard you breathin' deep an' natural jest a minute ago.”

“But why can't you sleep?” Floyd repeated.

“I don't know, Nelson,” Pole answered, sheepishly. “Don't you bother. Turn over an' git yore rest. I reckon I'm studyin' too much. Thar's nothin' on earth that will keep a feller awake like studyin'. I hain't closed my eyes. I've been lyin' here wonderin' an' wonderin' why that old cuss didn't want to take that money.”

“Why, he simply didn't feel like accepting it from a—a stranger and a man he had treated coldly, and perhaps too severely, on a former meeting. You see, he felt unworthy—”

“Unworthy hell! That ain't it — you kin bet yore socks that ain't it! That *sort* o' man, in the hole he's in, ain't a-goin' to split hairs like that, when he's on the brink o' ruin an' ready to commit suicide. No, siree, you'll have to delve deeper into human nature than that. Looky' here, Nelson. I'm on to a certain thing to-night fer the fust time.

## Pole Baker

Why didn't you tell me before this that Henry A. Floyd got his start in life by a plantation left him by his daddy?"

"Why, I thought you knew it!" Floyd said, sleepily. "But what's that got to do with his not wanting to take the money?"

"I don't know," Pole said. "I'll have to study on it. You turn over an' git that nap out. Yo're a-yawnin' fit to bust that night-shirt."



## XXXIX



It was about eight o'clock the next morning when Floyd waked. The first thing he saw was Pole seated in the window chewing tobacco. He was fully dressed, had shaved, and wore a new white shirt and collar that glistened like porcelain in the morning sun; he had on also a new black cravat which he had tied very clumsily.

"Good gracious, have you been waiting for me?" Floyd cried, as he sprang out of bed and looked at his watch.

"Not much I hain't," the mountaineer smiled. "I was up at my usual time, at sunrise. I struck a restaurant and got me some fried eggs an' coffee, an' then walked half over this dern town."

"Well, I'm sorry you've had your breakfast," Floyd said, "for I wanted you to go down with me."

"No, thankee"—Pole shrugged his shoulders and smiled—"I tried that last night in yore place, an' thar was so many niggers in burial suits standin' round that big room that it looked like resurrection day in a coon graveyard. The damned idiots stared at me as ef they thought I'd blowed in off'n a load o' hay. They passed me from one to t'other like coals o' fire on a shovel till they landed me in a corner whar nobody wouldn't see me."

## Pole Baker

Floyd laughed. "You are all right, Pole; don't you ever let that fact escape you."

"Do you think so, Nelson? Well, anyway, a biggity nigger waiter tried to take me down once when I was here, about a year ago. I'd heard a good deal o' talk about that fine eatin'-room down the street whar only the big Ikes git the'r grub, an', wantin' a snack, I drapped in an' hung up my hat. The head coon tuck me to a table whar some other fellows was eatin', an' another one made me a present of a handkerchief an' shoved a card under my nose. The card had lots o' Dutch on it, an' I was kinder flustered, but as the nigger looked like he understood our language, I told 'im to never mind the printin' but to fetch me two fried eggs an' a cup o' coffee an' free bread, ef he had it, an' ef not to charge it in the bill. Well, sir, after I'd give the order, the coon still stood thar, tryin' his level best to turn up his flat nose; so I axed 'im what he was waitin' fer, an' he sneered an' axed me ef that was all I expected to eat. I told 'im it was, an', with a grin at the coon at the next table, he shuffled off. Well, you know, I was hot under the collar, an' I seed that the other men at the table looked like they was with me, though they didn't chip in. Purty soon my waiter come back with my order, an', with a sniff, he set it down. It looked like he thought jest to be a lackey in a fine house like that was next to wearin' wings an' flyin' over golden streets. He axed me ag'in ef that was all I wanted, an' when I said it was he give another sniff, an' drawed out a pad an' writ down twenty-five cents on it in great big figures, an' tore off the leaf an' drapped it

## Pole Baker

in front o' my plate. 'Mighty small bill,' he said. 'Yes,' said I, 'that order 'ud 'a' cost fifty cents in a *first-class* place, but I was busy an' didn't have time to go any furdur.' Well, sir, them men in front o' me jest hollered. They banged on the table with the'r knives an' plates, an' yelled till everybody in the room stood up to see what was the matter. One big, fat, jolly-faced man with a red, bushy mustache in front of me re'ched his paw clean across the table an' said: 'Put 'er thar, white man; damn it, put 'er thar!' I tuck a drink with 'im when we went out. He tried to buy me a five-dollar hat to remember 'im by, but I wouldn't take it."

Floyd laughed heartily. He had finished dressing. "Did you finally get it settled in your mind, Pole, why that old man didn't want to take my check last night?"

"Thar's a lots o' things I've got to git settled in my mind," was the somewhat evasive reply. "I told you I was goin' to take the ten-thirty train fer Darley, but I ain't a-goin' a step till I've seed a little furdur into this business. Looky' here, Nelson Floyd, fer a man that's had as much dealin' with men in all sorts o' ways as you have, you are a-actin' quar."

"I don't understand you." Floyd had put his hand on the latch to open the door, but, seeing his friend's serious face, he went back to the window wondering what Pole was driving at.

"You say," said Pole, "that Henry A. Floyd came into his plantation at his daddy's death?"

"That's my impression, Pole."

## Pole Baker

The mountaineer went to the cuspidor near the washstand and spat deliberately into it; then he came back wiping his lips on his long hand.

"An' when the old man died he jest had two sons—yore daddy an' this one here?" Pole said, tentatively, his heavy brows drawn together.

"Yes, that's right, Pole."

"Well, Nelson"—the mountaineer was staring steadily at his friend—"I make a rule never to judge a person too quick, but whar I see a motive fer evil in a man that ain't plumb straight, I generatively find some'n' crooked."

"I'm sure I don't understand you, Pole," Floyd said, his eyes wide in curiosity.

Pole stepped near to Floyd and laid his hand on his arm.

"Do you mean to tell me, as keen and sharp as you are, that you tuck that old skunk's word about a matter as important as that is, when he come into property from yore granddaddy—property that 'ud be part yore'n as his brother's son? Shucks! I'm jest a mountain scrub, but I ain't as big a fool as that.

"Oh, I know!" said Floyd, wearily. "I suppose you are right, but I don't care to go to law about a little handful of property like that; besides, you know it would be my interest *only* in case I was a *lawful* heir—don't forget that damnable fact, Pole."

"I'm not thinkin' about the value of property, nuther," said Baker; "but, my boy, I am lookin' fer a *motive*—a motive fer rascality, an' I think I've found one as big as a barn. I don't any more

## Pole Baker

believe that dirty tale old Floyd told you than I'd believe it about my old saint of a mother."

"But you don't know what he showed me, Pole," Floyd sighed. "I never had the heart to go over it thoroughly, but it was conclusive enough to draw a black curtain over my whole life."

"I don't care, Nelson," Pole said, warmly. "I don't give a damn what he said, or showed you. Thar's a big, rotten stench in Denmark, I'm here to tell you; an' ef I don't squeeze the truth out o' that old turnip before night I'll eat my hat. You go on an' git yore breakfast, an' let me map out—"

There was rap on the door. Floyd opened it. A negro porter in uniform stood on the threshold.

"A man down-stairs wants to see you, Mr. Floyd," he announced.

"Did he give his name?" Nelson asked.

"No, sir, he didn't."

"He's an old, white-headed, dingy-faced fellow, ain't he?" Pole put in.

"Yes, sir," answered the servant. "He looks like he's sick."

"Well, you tell 'im to come up here," said Pole, his face rigid, and his eyes gleaming triumphantly. When the negro had gone the two friends stood facing each other. "Nelson, my boy," Pole said, tremulously, "I'm goin' to stroll outside down the hall. I'd bet a full-blooded Kentucky mare to a five-cent ginger-cake that you can run this whole rotten business up a tree if you will play your cards exactly right. Looky' here, Nelson, I've changed my mind about goin' out o' this room. Thar's entirely too much at stake to leave you with the

## Pole Baker

reins to hold. You are too touchy on a certain delicate subject—you'll take a lot o' guff rather than ask questions. I wish you'd go out and let me meet that man fust."

"I'll do anything you suggest, Pole," Floyd declared, his face twitching sensitively.

"Well, you skoot into that empty room next door. I seed it open when I come up. Let me have the old codger to myself fer jest five minutes and then I'll turn 'im over to you. Hurry up! I don't want 'im to see you here."

Floyd acted instantly. Pole heard the door of the adjoining room close just as the elevator stopped at the floor they were on.

"Good," he ejaculated. He threw himself back in a chair and had just picked up a newspaper when old Floyd cautiously peered in at the half-open door.

"Come in, come in, Mr. Floyd," Pole said, cordially. "Early bird, ain't you?"

"They told me Mr. Floyd was here," the old man said, awkwardly, as he stepped inside and glanced around the room. He was, in the open daylight, even paler and more despondent-looking than he had appeared the previous evening. In his hand he held Nelson's check folded and clutched tightly.

"He's jest gone out," Pole said, indicating a chair, "set down; he'll be back here in a minute."

"I—I thought he was up here alone," the old man stammered.

"Oh, it don't make no difference," Pole smiled, easily, "me 'n' Nelson's jest like two brothers. You see, what one knows the other does. The truth

## Pole Baker

is, me 'n' him work together, Mr. Floyd, an' I've been investigatin' that case about his mammy an' daddy fer sometime. I run the whole thing down yesterday, an' come in an' told 'im about it last night after he'd got back from yore house. By gum! the boy broke down an' cried like a child fer puore joy. It would 'a' done you good to 'a' seed 'im. That was an' awfully nasty thing fer a proud young sperit to stand up under, an' you bet gittin' it off was a relief."

"You mean—" The old man sank heavily into a chair, but he could go no further. He stared helplessly into Pole's inscrutable face, and then his shifting eyes fell guiltily.

"Why, you see," Pole smiled, plausibly; "all I wanted was a clew to start from, an' after nosin' about whar Nelson's daddy had lived I at last discovered that he was part heir to that property o' yore'n, then, you see, the whole shootin'-match was as clear as a wart on the side of my own nose. The next discovery was the marriage record, an' then I had the whole thing in apple-pie order. You needn't set thar an' look scared out o' yore skin, Mr. Floyd. Nelson 'ud have his right arm sawed off at the shoulder-joint rather 'n prosecute you. He told me last night that he'd stand by you. He's got money to burn, an' he'll never let his daddy's brother suffer. He told me jest this mornin'— 'Pole,' said he, 'I don't believe Uncle Henry would 'a' kept this back so long ef he hadn't been mighty nigh out o' his head with his own troubles.'"

"God knows I wouldn't! God knows that!" sobbed the old man, impulsively. "I meant to tell

## Pole Baker

him the truth the day I met you and told you he was my nephew, but I had a sick spell, and I got to worrying about the little all I had for my old age. I thought you were prying into matters, too, and knew that any question about the titles would make my creditors jump on me, and—”

“I see, I see!” said Pole. Indifference was in his voice, but his rugged face was afire, his great, eager eyes were illumined by a blaze of triumph. “I reckon the proof you showed him was forgery, Mr. Floyd, but of a harmless kind that most any man in trouble naturally would—”

“No, those letters were not forgeries,” broke in the old man. “They were really my brother’s, but they related to his life with another woman. When their child died, she deserted him for another man. My brother came home broken-hearted, but he finally got over it, and married a nice girl of good family. She was Nelson’s mother. In my great trouble, and facing ruin, it struck me that the letters would convince the boy and he would keep quiet and not put in a claim until—until I could see my way out—but now, you say he knows it all.”

“Yes, an’ is so happy over it, Mr. Floyd, that instead o’ givin’ you trouble, he’ll throw his arms around you. God bless you, old hoss, you’ve been denyin’ the finest member yore family ever had. I reckon you can turn over to him sufficient proof”—Pole drew himself up with a start—“proof, I mean, that will, you see, sort o’ splice in with all I’ve run up on—proof that he is legally yore nephew.”

“Oh, plenty!” the old man said, almost eagerly;



## Pole Baker

"and I'll get it up at once. I've brought his check back," he unfolded it and held it in his quivering hands. "I couldn't take money from him after treating him as I have."

Pole laughed outright. "You keep that check, old man," he said. "Nelson Floyd will cram it down yore throat ef you won't take it any other way. I tell you he's jest tickled to death. He thinks the world and all of you because you are the only kin he ever laid eyes on. Now, you stay right whar you are an' I'll send 'im to you. He's not fur off."

Hurrying into the next room, Pole saw Floyd standing at a window looking out into the street, a touch of his old despondency on him. He caught Pole's triumphant smile and stood with lips parted in suspense.

"It's jest as I told you, my boy," the mountaineer said, with a chuckle. "He's owned up to the whole blasted thing. You've got as good a right to vote in America as any man in it."

"Good God, Pole, you don't mean—"

"You go in thar an' he'll tell you all about it." Pole continued to smile.

"You say he has actually confessed of his own accord?" Floyd cried, incredulously.

"Well, I *did* sorter have to lead 'im along a little," Pole laughed. "To unlock his jaws, I told 'im me 'n' you already knowed the facts, so you might as well take that stand, give 'im plenty o' rope an' let 'im tell you all about it. But don't be hard on 'im, Nelson; the pore old cuss wanted to do the fair thing but was pressed to the wall by circumstances an' devilish men."

## Pole Baker

"Thank God, Pole, thank God!" Floyd cried. "I can hardly believe it's true."

"Well, it is, all right enough," Baker assured him. "Now, I'm goin' to catch the ten-thirty train. I want to git home before you do, an' git this thing circulated—so nobody won't snub you an' feel bad about it afterwards. I'll strike old Mrs. Snodgrass the fust thing. She is editor of the *Hill-top Whirlwind*, an' will have an'extra out ten minutes after I land containin' full particulars. Fer once I'm goin' to put her to a good use. She'll certainly make the rounds, an' as I don't want the old thing to walk 'er props off, I'll lend 'er a hoss. But I'll tell you what I'd like fer you to do, Nelson, an' I almost ax it as a favor."

"What's that, Pole?"

"Why, I want you to take that old chap under yore wing to-day an' git 'im out o' the clutch o' them shyster lawyers that's got 'im scared to death."

"You may rest assured that I'll do that," Floyd said, as he hurried away.

A moment later, as Pole was passing Nelson's room to reach the main stairway, he glanced through the open door. Old Floyd sat with bowed head, wiping his eyes on his handkerchief, and his nephew stood by him, his hand resting on his shoulder.

## XL



THREE days later, towards sundown, as Pole was about to enter Floyd & Mayhew's store, the old man came from behind one of the counters and, with a smile of welcome, caught his arm and drew him to the edge of the sidewalk.

"I am not much of a hand to talk on any subject, Pole," he said. "But there is something I've got to say to you, and it comes from the heart."

"Well, ef it ain't a dun I'll be glad to hear it," Pole smiled. "When I fust catched sight of you, it flashed over me that ef I didn't make another payment on that debt you'd have to take my farm. But I'm gettin' on my feet now, Mr. Mayhew, an'—"

"I'll never bother you on that score," the merchant said, impulsively. "I was just about to tell you that I am deeply grateful for what you did for Nelson. Oh, he's told me all about it!" The old man held up his hand and stopped Pole, who was on the point of decrying his part in the matter in question. "Yes, he told me all you did, Baker, and I don't actually believe any other man in the whole state could have worked it so fine; and the boy's coming back here, Pole, has been my financial salvation. I couldn't have kept on here, and it would have killed me to see the old business fall to pieces."

## Pole Baker

"You bet, I'm glad he's back, too," Pole returned. "An' he's happy over it, ain't he, Mr. Mayhew?"

"Ah, there's the trouble, Baker!" the old man sighed. "It looks like, with all that has come his way of late, that he would be satisfied, but he isn't—he simply isn't. Baker, I think I see what's lacking."

"You think you do, Mr. Mayhew?" Pole leaned forward anxiously.

"Yes, I believe it's due to Nathan Porter's daughter. God knows she's the very girl for him. She's one woman that I admire with all my heart. Nelson's got sense; he sees her good qualities, and wants her, but the report is out that her and Hillhouse are courting down at Cartersville. The preacher's had two weeks' extension on his vacation, and they tell me he is cutting a wide swath. Folks down there are raving over his bright sermons, and naturally that will flatter and influence a woman's judgment. Besides, I really believe the average woman would rather marry a mountain circuit-rider on three hundred a year than a man in easy circumstances in any other calling."

"I don't know as to that," Pole said, evasively. "Nobody kin pick an' choose fer a woman. Ef I had a dozen gals I'd keep my mouth shet on the husband line. That's old man Dickey's policy, over at Darley; he has ten gals that he says has married men in every line o' business under the sun. The last one come to 'im an' declared she wanted to marry a tight-rope walker that was exhibitin' in the streets. That sorter feazed the old chap, and he told the gal that her husband never could rise but jest so high in the world an' was shore to come down

## Pole Baker

sooner or later, but she was the doctor an' to go ahead. Even *that* marriage turned out all right, fer one day the chap, all in stars an' spangles an' women's stockin's, fell off'n of a rope forty feet from the ground. He struck a load o' hay an' broke his fall, but on his way down he seed the sale sign of a grocery across the street an' bought the business, an' now Dickey's gettin' his supplies at whole-sale prices."

Turning from the old man, Pole passed the clerks and a few customers in the store and went back to Floyd's desk, where his friend sat writing.

"Got yore workin' gear on I see," he observed, with a smile. "You look busy."

Floyd pointed to a stack of account-books on the desk and smiled. "The old man got these in an awful mess," he said. "But I am getting them straight at last."

"How's business?" Pole asked.

"In the store, pretty good," Floyd answered; "but as for my own part, I'm busy on the outside. I closed a nice deal yesterday, Pole. You remember the offer I made Price for his plantation, furnished house, and everything else on the place?"

"You bet."

"Well, he came to my terms. The property is mine at last, Pole."

"Gee whiz! what a purty investment! It's a little fortune, my boy."

"Yes, it's the sort of thing I've wanted for a long time," Floyd returned. "Most men have their hobbies, and mine has always been to possess a model farm that I could keep up to the highest notch of

## Pole Baker

perfection for my own pleasure and as an inspiration to my neighbors."

"Bully, bully place, Nelson! You'll always be proud of it."

"There's only one drawback," said Floyd; "you see, it will never suit me to live there myself, and so I've got to get a sharp manager that I can trust."

"Ah yes, you bet you have!" Pole declared.

"And such a man is hard to find, Pole."

"Huh, I should think so!" the farmer answered. "Captain Duncan told me he fell behind three thousand dollars in one year all on account of his manager being careless while nobody was there to watch 'im."

"He never paid his man enough," Nelson said. "I shall not follow that plan. I'm going to pay my superintendent a good, stiff salary, so as to make it interesting to him. Pole, there is only one man alive that I'd trust that place to."

Pole stared in a bewildered way. Floyd was leading him beyond his depth.

"You say thar ain't, Nelson?" was all he could say.

"And that man is you, Pole."

"Me? Good Lord, you are plumb cracked—you are a-jokin', Nelson."

"No, I never was more serious in my life. If I can't get you to take that place in hand for me, I shall sell it to the first bidder. Pole, I'm depending on you. The salary is three thousand a year, rent of the house free, and all the land you want for your own use thrown in."

"Three thousand! Geewhilikins," Pole laughed.

## Pole Baker

"I'd be a purty lookin' chump drawin' that much of any man's money."

"You'll draw that much of mine," Floyd said, looking him straight in the eye, and you will make me the best financial return for it of any man in the world."

"That's ridiculous, Nelson, you are plumb, stark crazy!" Pole was really frowning in displeasure over he hardly knew what.

"No, I'm not crazy, either," Floyd pursued, laying his hand on the farmer's shoulder. "You've often said that I have a good head for business, well—that's exactly what's causing me to make you this proposition."

"You are a liar, an' you know it!" Pole growled. "You know you are a-doin' it beca'se you want to help me 'n' my family, and, by the holy smoke, I won't let you. Thar! I'm flat-footed on that! *I won't let you.* Friendship is one thing an' takin' money from a friend is some'n' else. It's low down, I'm here to tell you. It's low down, even ef a body *is* on the ragged edge o' poverty, fer ever' man ort to work fer hisse'f."

"Look here, Pole, I get out of patience with you sometimes," Floyd said, earnestly. "Now, answer this: don't you know that if you *did* accept my offer that you would not let my interests suffer wilfully?"

"Of course I do, damn it!" Pole retorted, almost angrily. "Ef I was workin' fer you in *any* capacity I'd wear my fingers to the bone to do what was right by you."

"Well, there you are!" Floyd cried, triumphantly. "Wouldn't I be a pretty fool not to try to employ

## Pole Baker

you, when not one man in ten thousand will be that conscientious? You've answered yourself, Pole. I'm going to have you on that job if I have to double the pay."

"Well, you won't git me, that's certain!" Pole retorted. "You are offerin' it to me fer no other reason than that we are friends, an' I'll be damned ef I take it."

"Look here, Pole Baker," Floyd smiled, as he left his high stool, locked his arm in that of his companion, and drew him to the open door in the rear. "You have several times given me lectures that have done me more solid good than all the sermons I ever heard, and it's my time now."

"All right, shoot away!" Pole laughed. "The truth is, I feel derved mean about some o' the things I've said to you when I look back on 'em."

"Well, you've shown me many of my biggest faults, Pole, and I am going to dangle one of yours before your eyes. I've seen you, my friend, take money that your reason told you was needed by your wife and children, whom you love devotedly, and, in a sort of false pride, I've seen you spend it on men of the lowest order. You did it under the mistaken notion that it was your time to treat. In other words, you seemed possessed with the idea that you owed that crowd more than you did that tender, trusting little woman and her children."

"Damn it, you needn't remind me of that, Nelson Floyd! I know that as well as any man alive!" Pole's face was full, and his voice husky with suppressed emotion.

"I know you know it, Pole, and here is something



## Pole Baker

else you'll have to admit, and that is, that you are this minute refusing something that would fairly fill your wife with happiness, and you are doing it under the damnably false notion that such deals should not be made between friends. Why, man, friends are the only persons who ought to have intimate business relations. It is only friends who can work for mutual benefit."

"Oh, I can't argue with you," Pole said, stubbornly, and he turned suddenly and walked down through the store to the front. Floyd was watching him, and saw him pause on the edge of the sidewalk, his head down, as if in deep meditation. He was a pathetic-looking figure as he stood with the red sunset sky behind him, his face flushed, his hair thrown back from his massive brow.

Taking his hat, Floyd went out and took him by the arm, and together they strolled down the street in the direction of Pole's farm. Presently Floyd said: "Surely you are not going to go back on me, Pole. I want you, and I want you bad."

"Thar's one thing you reminded me of in thar at the desk," Pole said, in a low, shaky voice, "and it is this: Nelson, the little woman I married hain't never had one single hour o' puore joy since the day I tuck 'er from her daddy's house. Lord, Lord, Nelson, ef I could—ef I *jest could* go home to 'er now an' tell 'er I'd got a lift in the world like that the joy of it 'ud mighty nigh kill 'er."

"Well, Pole"—Floyd suddenly drew him around till they stood face to face—"you do it. Do you hear me? *You do it*. If you don't, you will be taking an unfair advantage of a helpless woman.

## Pole Baker

It's her right, Pole. You haven't a word to say in the matter. The house will be vacant to-morrow. Move her in, Pole; move the little woman in and make her happy."


The eyes of the two men met. Pole took a deep, lingering breath, then he held out his hand.

"I'll go you, Nelson," he said; "and ef I don't make that investment pay, I'll hang myself to the limb of a tree. Gee whiz! won't Sally be tickled!"

They parted; Floyd turned back towards the village, and Pole went on homeward with a quick, animated step. Floyd paused at the roadside and looked after him through the gathering dusk.

"He's happy, and so will his wife be," he said to himself. "But as for me, that's another matter. She's going to marry Hillhouse. Great God, how strange that seems! Cynthia and that man living together as man and wife!"

## XLI

T was almost dark when Pole reached his humble domicile. The mountain air was cool, and through the front window of the living-room he saw the flare of a big, cheerful fire. He went into the house, but his wife was not in sight. Looking into the bedroom, he saw the children sound asleep, their yellow heads all in a row.

"God bless 'em!" he said, fervently. "I reckon the'r mammy's down at the barn." Going out at the back-door, he went to the cow-lot, and then he heard Sally's voice rising above the squealing of pigs and the cackling of hens. "So, so, Lil! can't you behave?" he heard her saying. "I git out o' all patience. I can't keep the brat out. I might as well give up, an' yet we've *got* to have milk."

"What's the matter, Sally?" Pole called out, as he looked over the rail-fence.

"Why, I can't keep this fool calf away," she said, turning to him, her tin pail in her hand, her face red with vexation. "The little imp is stealin' all the milk. He's had enough already to bust 'im wide open."

Pole laughed merrily; there was much stored in his mind to make him joyous. "Let me git at the dern little skunk," he said; and vaulting over the fence

## Pole Baker

with the agility of an acrobat, he took the sleek, fawnlike creature in his strong arms and stood holding it against his breast as if it were an infant. "That's the way to treat 'im?" he cried. And carrying the animal to the fence, he dropped it on the outside. "Thar, you scamp!" he laughed; "you mosey around out here in the tater-patch till you l'arn some table manners."

Sally laughed and looked at her husband proudly. "I'm glad you come when you did," she said, "fer you wouldn't 'a' had any milk to go on yore mush; me 'n' the childern have had our supper an' they are tucked away in bed."

"Let me finish milkin'," Pole said. "An' you go in an' git my mush ready." He took the pail and sat down on an inverted soap-box. "I'll make up fer that calf's stealin' or I'll have old Lil's bag as flabby as an empty meal-sack."

In a few minutes he followed Sally into the kitchen where she had his simple supper ready for him. When he had eaten it, he led her into the living-room and they sat down before the fire. It was only for a moment, though, for she heard little Billy talking in his sleep and sprang up and went to him. She came back to her chair in a moment.

"The very fust spare money I git," she said, "I'm goin' to have panes o' glass put in that window in thar. I keep old rags stuffed in the holes, but the rain beats 'em down, and hard winds blow 'em out. It don't take as much fire-wood to keep a tight house warm as it does an open one like this."

"Sally, we ought to live in a great big fine house," he said, his eyes on the coals under the red logs."

## Pole Baker

"I say!" she sneered. "I've been afeard some'n' mought happen to drive us out o' this 'un. Pole, to tell the truth, I've been worryin'."

"You say you have, Sally?"

"Yes, I worry all day, an' sometimes I wake up in the night an' lie unable to sleep fer thinkin'. I'm bothered about the debt you owe Floyd & Mayhew. It's drawin' interest an' climbin' higher an' higher. I know well enough that Nelson wouldn't push us, but, Pole, ef he was to happen to die, his business would have to be settled up, an' they say Mr. Mayhew hain't one speck o' mercy on pore folks. When it was reported that some'n' had happened to Nelson a while back, I was mighty nigh out o' my head with worry, but I didn't tell you. Pole, we've got to git free o' that debt by some hook or crook."

"I think we kin manage it," Pole said, his eyes kindling with a subtle glow.

"That's the way you always talk," Mrs. Baker sighed; "but that isn't payin' us out."

"It comes easy to some folks to make money," Pole said, with seeming irrelevance; "an' hard to others. Sally, did you ever—have you ever been on Colonel Price's plantation?"

"Many and many a time, Pole," Mrs. Baker answered, with a reminiscent glow in her face. "When I was a girl, he used to let our crowd have picnics at his big spring, just below the house, and one rainy day he invited some of us all through it. It was the only time I was ever in as fine a house as that an' it tuck my breath away. Me 'n' Lillie Turnbull slipped into the big parlor by ourselves and set down

## Pole Baker

an' made out like we lived thar an' was entertainin' company. She'd rock back an' forth in one o' the big chairs an' pretend she was a fine lady. She was a great mimic, an' she'd call out like thar was servants all around, an' order 'em to fetch 'er cool water an' fan 'er an' the like. Poor Lillie! the last I heard of her she was beggin' bread fer her childern over at Gainesville whar Ned was killed in an' explosion at the cotton-mill whar he'd finally got work.

"I jest started to tell you," Pole said, "that Nelson Floyd bought that plantation to-day—bought it lock, stock, an' barrel—house, furniture, hosses, implements—everythin'!"

"You don't say!" Mrs. Baker leaned forward, her eyes wide in surprise.

"Yes, he tuck it in out o' the wet with part o' the money he made on that Atlanta deal. An' do you know, Sally, I was right thar in the back end o' his store an' heard 'im contract with a man to manage it fer 'im. The feller is to git three thousand dollars a year in cash—two hundred an' fifty dollars a month, mind you, an' also the use of the big furnished house, an' as much land fer himself as he needed, the use of the buggies an' carriage an' spring-wagon an' barn—in fact, the whole blamed lay-out. He axed me about hirin' the feller an' I told 'im the dern skunk wasn't wuth his salt, but Nelson would have his way. He engaged 'im on the spot."

"Who was the man, Pole?" there was just a shade of heart-sick envy in the tired countenance of the woman.

"Oh, it was a feller that come up from Atlanta about three days ago," Pole answered, with his

## Pole Baker

usual readiness. "It seems that him an' Nelson was sorter friends, an' had had dealin's in one way an' another before."

"Has this—this new man any wife?" Mrs. Baker inquired, as a further evidence of secret reflections.

"Yes—a fine woman, and nice childern, Sally. He seemed to be the only scrub in the bunch."

Mrs. Baker sighed. "I guess he's got some'n' in 'im," she said, her eyes cast down, "or Nelson Floyd, with his eye for business, wouldn't 'a' give 'im a mansion like that to live in an' all them wages. He must be an educated man, Pole."

"No he ain't," Pole smiled; "he barely kin read an' write an' figure a little; that's all. Sally, the feller's a-settin' right here in this room now. I'm the manager o' that big place, Sally."

She laughed as if to humor him, and then she raised her eyes to his. "Pole," she said, in a cold, hard voice, "don't joke about a thing like that. Somehow I don't believe that men who joke about doin' well, as es ef the like was clean out o' the'r reach, ever do make money; it's them that say what one kin do another kin that make the'r way."

"But I wasn't jokin', little woman." Pole caught her hand and pressed it. "As God is my judge, I'm the man, an' you' an' me an' the childern are a-goin' to move into that fine house right off."

For a moment she stared into his face incredulously, and then gradually the truth dawned upon her.

"Oh, Pole," she cried. "I can't stand it—it will *kill* me!" and with a great sob the little woman burst into tears. He tried to stop her, his rough hand on her frail, thin back, but her emotion swept through

## Pole Baker

her like a storm. Suddenly she raised a wet, glowing face to his, and, with her sun-browned hand pressed tightly on her breast, she cried: "It hurts; it hurts right here—oh, Pole, I'm afraid it will kill me!"

In a few moments she was calmer, and as she sat in the red fire-light all aglow with her new happiness, she was a revelation to him. Not for years had he seen her look that way. She seemed young again. The marks of sorrow, poverty, and carking fear had dropped from her. Her eyes had the glisten of bedewed youth, her voice the vibrant ring of unquenchable joy. Suddenly she stood up.

"What you goin' to do?" he asked.

"To wake the childern an' tell 'em," she said.

"I don't believe I would, Sally," he protested.

"But I am—I *am*!" she insisted. "Do you reckon I'm goin' to let them pore little things lie thar an' not know it—not know it till mornin'?"

He let her have her way, and walked out on the little porch and slowly down to the barn. Suddenly he stretched out his hands and held them up towards the stars, and took a deep, reverent breath.

"I wish I'd l'arnt to pray when I was a boy," he said, lowering his arms. "Somehow I feel like I've at last come through. I've come from the shadow of the Valley of Death out into God's eternal light. Then I'd like to put in a word at the Throne fer Nelson. Ef I knowed how to say it, I'd beg the Almighty to turn Hillhouse down. Hillhouse kin git 'im another one, but Nelson never kin—never in this world! He hain't got that look in the eyes. He's



## Pole Baker

got a case o' woman as bad as I have, an' that's sayin' a lots."

Pole turned and slowly retraced his steps. Going in and sitting down by the fire again, he heard his wife's voice rising and falling in a sweet monotone. After a while she ceased speaking and came back to the fire.

"So you had to wake 'em," he said, tenderly, very tenderly, as if his soul had melted into words.

"I tried, Pole, but I couldn't," she made answer. "I shuck 'em an' shuck 'em. I even tuck little Billy up an' rolled 'im over an' over, but he was too dead tired to wake. So I give up."

"But I heard you talkin'," Pole said, wonderingly.

"Yes, I had to talk to somebody, Pole, an'—well, I was a-tellin' 'em. They was asleep, but I was a-tellin' 'em."

She sat down by him. "I ain't a-goin' to close my eyes to-night," she went on, softly; "but what does it matter? I reckon thar won't be no sleepin' in heaven, an' that's whar I am right now, Pole."

She put the side of her flushed face down on his knee and looked into the fire.

## XLII



THE following evening about eight o'clock Floyd walked over to Baker's house. He found his friend seated alone before a big fire of red logs. "Hello! Come in, Nelson," Pole called out, cordially, as he saw the young man through the open door-way. "Come in an' set down."

The young merchant entered and took a vacant chair.

"How's your wife, Pole?" he asked.

"Huh, crazy, crazy—crazy as a bed-bug!" Baker laughed. "You'd think so ef you could see 'er. She spent all the evenin' at yore plantation, an' come home beamin' all over with what she's seed an' her plans." The farmer jerked his thumb over his shoulder towards the kitchen. "She's in thar packin' up scraps now. She knows we can't leave till day after to-morrow, but she says she wants to be doin' some'n' towards it, even ef she has to pack an' unpack an' pack again. My boy, she's the happiest creature God ever—I mean that *you* ever made, dern you. She has yore name on 'er tongue every minute in the day. You know she's always said she had as many childern as she wanted"—Pole laughed impulsively—"but she says now she'd go through it all ag'in ef she knowed it 'ud be a boy so she could call it after you."

## Pole Baker

"Well, I certainly would take it as a great honor," Floyd said. "Your children are going to make great men, Pole. They show it in their heads and faces."

"Well, I hope so, Nelson." Pole suddenly bent his head to listen. "That's Sally talkin' now," he said, with a knowing smile. "She sometimes talks about all this to 'erse'f, she's so full of it, but she ain't talkin' to 'erse'f now. You kin bet yore bottom dollar she ain't, Nelson. I say she ain't an' I mean it, my boy."

"Some one's in there, then?" said Floyd.

Pole looked steadily into the fire, not a muscle of his face changed. "Somebody come back from Cartersville this mornin'," he said, significantly.

Floyd's heart gave a big jump. "So I heard," he said, under his breath.

"Well, she's in thar now. She'd heard we was goin' to move an' come over jest after supper. She was plumb happy to see Sally so tickled. I didn't mean to eave'drop, but I went in the entry jest now to hang up my bridle an' couldn't help it. It was so purty, I could 'a' listened all day—Sally puttin' on, an' tellin' 'er she'd send the carriage over fer 'er to spend the day, an' that Cynthia must be shore an' send in 'er cyard at the door so thar 'ud be no mistake, an' so on."

Floyd made no response. He was studying Pole's face, digging into it with his eyes for something he felt lay just beneath the unruffled surface.

"Then I heard some'n' else," Pole said; "an' I'm goin' to feel mean about totin' it to you, beca'se women has a right to the'r secrets, an' who they pick an' choose fer the'r life-mates ort to be a sacred

## Pole Baker

matter, but this is a thing I think you have a right to be onto."

"What is that, Pole?" Floyd seemed to be holding his breath. He was almost pale in his great suspense.

"Why I heard Cynthia deny up an' down flat-footed that she was engaged to Hillhouse. Lord, you ort to 'a' heard her snort when Sally told 'er it had been the general belief about here ever since her an' him went off to Cartersville. She was good mad. I know that fer I heard Sally tryin' to pacify 'er. I heard Cynthia say all of a sudden: 'My mother put that report into circulation. I know it now, and she had no right to do it.'"

Floyd breathed more freely, a gleam of hope was in his eyes, his face was flushed. He said nothing.

Pole suddenly drew his feet back from the fire. "Don't you want a drink o' fresh water, Nelson?" he asked.

"No, thank you," Floyd said.

"Well, I do. Keep yore seat. Since I left off whiskey I'm a great water-drinker."

Pole had been gone only a minute when Floyd heard light steps in the entry leading to the kitchen. He sprang up, for Cynthia stood in the door-way.

"Why—why," she stammered, "Mr. Baker told me some one wanted to see me. I—I had no idea that you—"

"I want to see you bad enough, God knows, Cynthia," Floyd found himself saying, "but I did not tell him so. That, you know, would not be respecting the message you sent me."

## Pole Baker

"The message?" she said. "I'm sure I don't understand you."

"I mean the message you sent me by your mother," Floyd explained.

"But I didn't send you any message," Cynthia said, still mystified, as she stared frankly into his eyes.

"I mean the—the night I came for you," Floyd pursued, "the night I was so presumptuous as to think you'd run away with me."

"Oh, did she—did my mother tell you—" Cynthia was beginning to understand. "Did she say that I—"

"She told me you said you wanted me never to bother you again."

The girl lowered her head, the fire lighted up her face as she stood, her eyes on the rough floor. She was silent a moment as if in deep thought, then she looked into his eyes again. "I begin to see it all now," she said. "I wondered why you—how you could have treated me that way after—after all you'd said."

"Cynthia, what do you mean? Do, *do* tell me!" He leaned closer to her—she could feel his quick, excited breath. "Surely you could not believe I'd have left if you hadn't wished it. Oh, little girl, I have been the most miserable man alive over losing you. I know I am unworthy of you—I always shall be that—but losing you has nearly killed me. Your mother told me that awful night that you not only wanted me to let you alone, but that you were going to marry Hillhouse."

Cynthia gave him a full, frank glance. "Nelson,"

## Pole Baker

she said, "my mother made up most of what she told you that night. I did promise not to run away with you—she made me do that. You have no idea what she resorted to. She determined to thwart us. She made me believe her mind was wrong and that she would kill herself if I left."

"But you went to her yourself, dear," Floyd said, still in the dark, "and told her of our plans."

"No, I didn't, Nelson. She overheard our talk the week before. She followed me out to the grape-arbor and heard every word of it."

"Oh, I see—I see!" exclaimed Floyd; "she was at the bottom of it all."

"Yes, her mind was frightfully upset. She came to me this morning and cried and told me that she had heard so many nice things about you of late that she was afraid she had wronged you. She thinks now that her mind was really unbalanced that night. I believe it myself, for no thoroughly sane person could have played the part she did. She persuaded herself that your intentions were not pure and she felt justified in taking any step to save me."

"Oh, I remember now," said Floyd. "She could easily have misunderstood my meaning that night, for I was in such a state of nervous excitement that I did not go into details as to my plans. After I left you I remembered, too, that I had not offered you a beautiful ring that I'd bought for you in Atlanta. It's in my trunk in my room. Even after I'd lost all hope of ever winning you, I could not bear to part with it."

"Oh, Nelson, did you get me a ring?" She leaned

## Pole Baker

towards him in childlike eagerness. "What kind of one was it?"

"The prettiest, whitest diamond I could buy in Atlanta," Floyd said, almost holding his breath in suspense. "Oh, Cynthia, you say your mother kept you from meeting me that night. If you had come what would have been your decision?"

Cynthia's color rose; she avoided his hungry eyes as she looked down into the fire. The house was very still, and Pole Baker's voice suddenly rose into audibility.

"I tell you, I've jest *got* to have a kiss," he said, "and I'm goin' to have it right this minute! Do you reckon I'm goin' to stand here idle an' them two in thar—"

"Pole, Pole, stop! Let me alone—behave yore-se'f!" cried Mrs. Baker. There was a shuffling of feet then all was quiet.

Floyd leaned towards Cynthia till his lips almost touched her pink ear. "If you had met me that night what would have been my fate?" he asked, tremblingly.

Cynthia hesitated a moment longer, then she looked straight into his eyes and said, simply: "I was ready to go with you, Nelson. I'd thought it all over. I knew—I knew I'd be unhappy without you. Yes, I was ready to go."

"Thank God!" Floyd cried, taking her hands and holding them tenderly. "And Hillhouse, you are not engaged to him, then?"

"Oh no. He was very persistent at Cartersville, but I refused him there for the last time. There is a rich old maid in the town who is dead in love with

## Pole Baker

him and admires his preaching extravagantly. He showed me his worst side when I gave him his final answer. He told me she had money and would marry him and that he was going to propose to her. Do you think I could have lived with a creature like that, after—after—”

She went no further. Floyd drew her into his arms. Her head rested on his shoulder, his eyes feasting on her beautiful flushed face.

“After what?” he said. “Say it, darling—say it!”

“After knowing you,” she said, turning her face so that he could not see her eyes. “Nelson, I knew all along that you would grow to be the good, strong man you have become.”

“You made me all I am,” he said, caressingly. “You and Pole Baker. Darling, let’s go tell him.”

Floyd walked home with Cynthia half an hour later and left her at the door. She went into her mother’s room, and, finding the old woman awake, she told her of the engagement.

There was no light in the room save that of the moonbeams falling through the windows. Mrs. Porter sat up in her bed. For a moment she was silent, and Cynthia wondered what she would say.

“I’m glad, very glad,” Mrs. Porter said, huskily. “I was afraid I’d ruined all your chances. I see my mistake now. I misjudged him. Cynthia, I reckon my mind was really upset. I took a wrong view of the whole thing, and now”—the old woman’s voice broke—“and now I suppose you and he will always hate me.”

“Oh, mother, don’t talk that way!” Cynthia sat



